The New Criterion

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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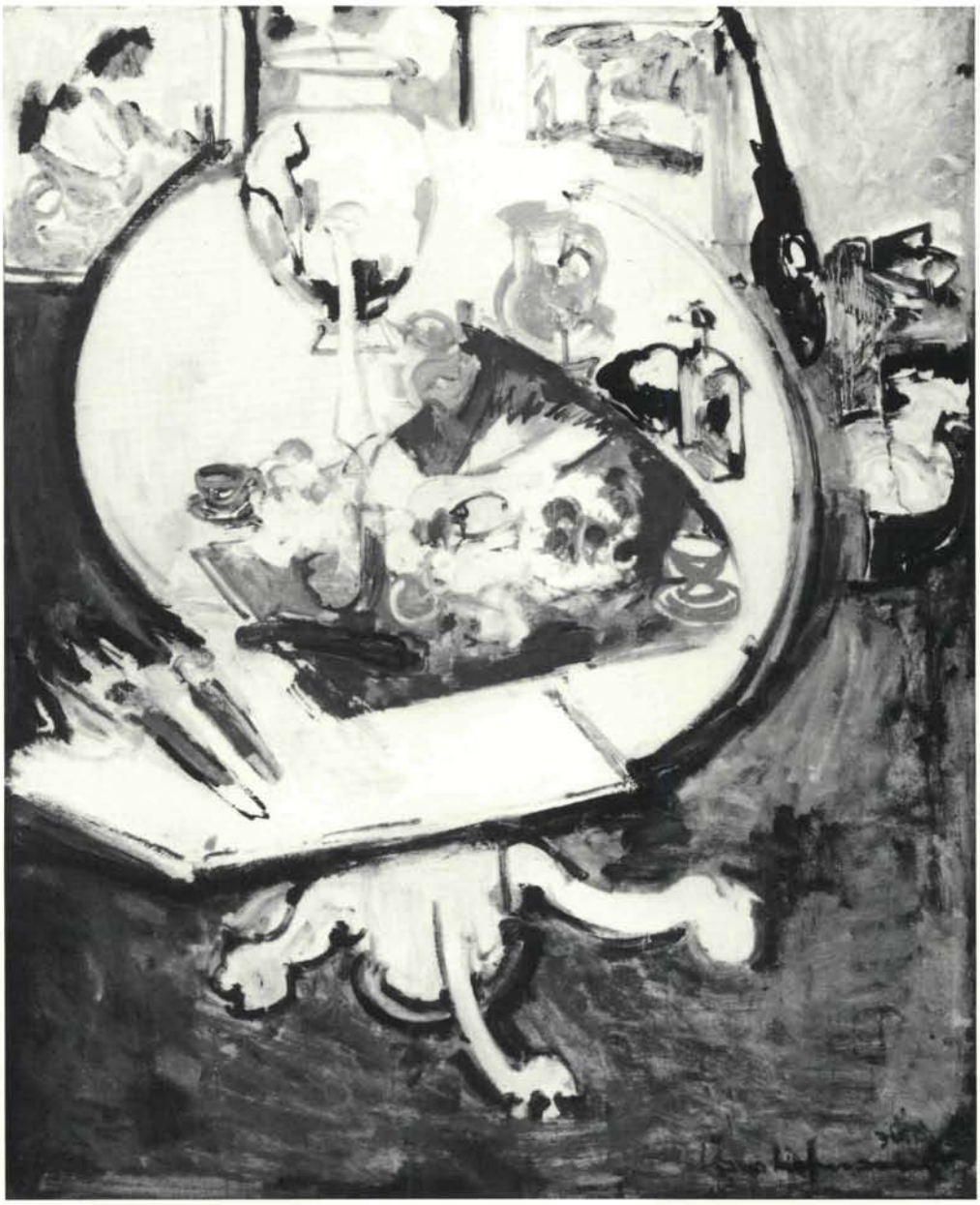

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Bruce Bawer, whose book *The Middle Generation* was published by Archon in October, is also the author of *The Contemporary Stylist,* recently published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Charles Edward Eaton's tenth collection, *New and Selected Poems,* will be published in 1987 by Cornwall Books.

Elias Friedensohn is an artist and a professor in the art department of Queens College.

James Gardner wrote on Jorge Luis Borges for the October issue of *The New Criterion.*

Creighton Gilbert teaches art history at Yale University.

Dan Hofstadter's book, *The Despot and the Slave,* a re-translation of Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe* together with a long essay on Constant's liaison with Mme. de Staël, has just been published in London by The Folio Society.

Roger Kimball reviewed *Reconstructing Individualism* for the December issue of *The New Criterion.*

Samuel Lipman has written in *The New Criterion* on Dominick Argento's *Casanova* (January 1986) and on Pierre Boulez in New York (April 1986).

Eva Resnikova writes on dance for *The New Republic* and *The New Criterion.*

Donna Rifkind wrote on the brothers of Henry James for the December issue of *The New Criterion.*

Gibbons Ruark's books include *A Program for Survival, Reeds,* and *Keeping Company,* which won the 1984 Saxifrage Prize.

Amity Shlaes is the features editor of the editorial page of *The Wall Street Journal/Europe.*

James W. Tuttleton wrote on the history of American literature for the November issue of *The New Criterion.*

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Clement Greenberg in the Forties

by Hilton Kramer

With the publication of the first two volumes of Clement Greenberg's *Collected Essays and Criticism,* we are at last on our way to having a comprehensive edition of the most important body of art criticism produced by an American writer in this century.[1] The two volumes now available—*Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944* and *Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*—bring together for the first time Mr. Greenberg's critical writings from the decade in which he emerged as the most informed and articulate champion of the New York School as well as one of our most trenchant analysts of the modern cultural scene. The two additional volumes promised for the future will presumably bring his remarkable critical oeuvre up to date. John O'Brian, the editor of the series, has so far carried out his duties with an exemplary scholarly tact—both of the new volumes contain useful notes, interesting biographical chronologies, and appropriate bibliographies—and the books have been produced by the University of Chicago Press in a very readable format. Under any circumstances the publication of Mr. Greenberg's *Collected Essays and Criticism* would have to be considered a capital intellectual event; but in the present climate, when so much that passes for serious criticism is in reality some form of academic twaddle, commercial hype, or political mystification, the appearance of these volumes also has a wonderfully bracing effect. For this is criticism that does not require us to surmount some impenetrable rhetorical barrier in order to discover what it is actually up to. It is plainly written, cogently argued, and admirably precise in the many discriminations and formulations it is concerned to make. For anything remotely comparable in intellectual quality or aesthetic intelligence, one would have to turn to the most illustrious of Mr. Greenberg's predecessors—to Julius Meier-Graefe in Germany and Roger Fry in England. In his own generation he stands alone.

It is one of the many virtues of the present edition of Mr. Greenberg's writings that it places them firmly in the context of the history which prompted them in the first place. When, some twenty-five years ago, Mr. Greenberg published a selection of his essays under the title of *Art and Culture,* he was frank to say that that book was "not intended as a completely faithful record of my activity as a critic." Although drawn from the first twenty years of Mr. Greenberg's production, many of the essays in *Art and Culture* had been substantially revised in order to give the reader a clear account of the author's current views. "Not only has much been altered," as Mr. Greenberg noted in his preface to *Art and Culture,* "but

1 *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism.* Edited by John O'Brian. University of Chicago Press. *Volume 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944,* 270 pages. $27.50. *Volume 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949,* 353 pages. $27.50.

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much more has been left out than put in." *Art and Culture* was certainly a very distinguished book. Indeed, for a quarter of a century it has remained without rival as the premiere work of art criticism in our time. Yet the emphasis which *Art and Culture* placed on the present inevitably had the effect of foreshortening our understanding of the past—both the critic's past, with all of the shifts in emphasis and perspective which any full-scale critical career is bound to encompass, and that of the art which he was attempting to come to grips with in a succession of discrete encounters. It is only with the publication of *The Collected Essays and Criticism* that we have now begun to have placed in our possession a complete account, month by month and year by year, of this crucial critical history.

It is another of the virtues of this edition that it illuminates—and with a fullness and candor that was no doubt inappropriate to the purposes of *Art and Culture*—the broad range of literary, artistic, and political interests that did so much to shape Mr. Greenberg's outlook as a writer. The first entry in Volume 1 is a review of Bertolt Brecht's *A Penny for the Poor.* The second is the author's now classic essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," written at the age of thirty and as much concerned with literature as with art. The third is an equally important but not so well-known essay, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," which attempted to explain in historical terms how it happened that modern art, in its "revolt against the dominance of literature"—the dominance, that is, of "subject matter at its most oppressive"—came to place "a new and greater emphasis upon form" and upon the physical medium. "Towards a Newer Laocoon" was, as Mr. Greenberg acknowledged, "an historical apology for abstract art," and may thus be considered something of a manifesto for the "formalist" view of art which he has steadfastly maintained throughout his subsequent career as a critic.

Interestingly, he was writing in these early years as a Marxist—an anti-Stalinist Marxist of the Trotskyist persuasion, to be sure, but a Marxist all the same. In this phase of his career Mr. Greenberg was very much a part of the *Partisan Review* circle that looked to Trotsky as a political guide in attempting to "save" the Revolution from what was looked upon as Stalin's "betrayal" of it. In the fourth entry in Volume 1 of *The Collected Essays*—an essay called "An American View," written for Cyril Connolly's magazine *Horizon* in 1940 and published in London during the Blitz—we are given a clear statement of the political folly which this ideological outlook entailed. "Hitler realizes this much: that in order to keep capitalism there must be fascism," Mr. Greenberg wrote; "Trotsky realizes that in order to keep democracy there must be a socialist revolution . . . . We must choose: either capitalism or democracy. One or the other must go. If we insist on keeping capitalism then we cannot fight Hitler. He must win."

Cyril Connolly promptly and correctly responded to this mistaken analysis by writing an article in the same issue of *Horizon* which firmly rejected Mr. Greenberg's claims. "It is obvious that this view," Connolly wrote, ". . . rests on an over-simplification of the facts, and if put into practice would lead to disaster." (Mr. O'Brian quotes Connolly's response in a footnote.) Before the end of the Forties Mr. Greenberg had more or less come to agree with Connolly, describing himself in a *Partisan Review* symposium in 1948 as an "ex- or disabused Marxist." And as an editor of *Commentary* from the late Forties to the end of the Fifties, he was, of course, in the forefront of those ex-radicals who played a role in articulating the case for what came to be characterized as anti-Communist, or Cold War, liberalism—a position from which, I believe, he has never since deviated.

What needs to be borne in mind about the role of Marxism in Mr. Greenberg's early writings is that (1) it did much to shape his view of history, and (2) it was never allowed to distort his judgment of particular artists. The extent to which a Marxist-influenced teleology came to be subsumed in his reading

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of art history is another matter. It can be argued—I have argued it myself—that some residue of the Marxian dialectic disposed him to find in art history, and most particularly the history of modern art, something in the realm of aesthetics ("subject matter at its most oppressive") that is more or less akin to the Marxist notion of class struggle as an iron law of historical development.[2] Something of the sort is certainly to be found in such essays as "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" and "Towards a Newer Laocoon," and it persists as a kind of leitmotif in a great many other essays, too. Yet it must be said that Mr. Greenberg's response to particular works of art is, more often than not, remarkably free of the ideological strictures to be found in his more theoretical pronouncements. And even in "Towards a Newer Laocoon," he was at some pains to underscore the limit that he placed on his own theoretical imperative:

> My own experience of art has forced me to accept most of the standards of taste from which abstract art has derived, but I do not maintain that they are the only valid standards through eternity. I find them simply the most valid ones at this given moment. I have no doubt that they will be replaced in the future by other standards, which will be perhaps more inclusive than any possible now. And even now they do not exclude all other possible criteria. I am still able to enjoy a Rembrandt more for its expressive qualities than for its achievement of abstract values—as rich as it may be in them.

This is not the observation of a closed mind, and the application of "other possible criteria" occurs more frequently in Mr. Greenberg's criticism than one expects from a writer so given to theoretical absolutes.

There is much discussion of poetry as well as of politics in these first two volumes of *The Collected Essays*; and fiction, philosophy, criticism, and even on one occasion the ballet—Anthony Tudor's *Dim Luster*—are likewise given some interesting attention. The Forties was also a period in which Mr. Greenberg was much occupied with his translations of Kafka, and Volume 2 contains the first of his essays on Kafka, written in 1946. There is little question, I think, that Mr. Greenberg had both the resources and the sensibility to become a first-rate literary critic. But it was the art rather than the literature of his time that claimed his primary allegiance, and it is, of course, as a chronicle of his art criticism that this new edition of his writings makes its principal claim on us.

During the period under review Mr. Greenberg was writing most regularly for *Partisan Review* and for *The Nation*. As Mr. O'Brian points out in his introduction to Volume 1, "His longer, justly celebrated essays were written primarily for *Partisan Review*, while his shorter, until now mostly unrecovered articles, appeared mostly in *The Nation*." Read now in sequence, these articles give us an amazingly detailed, close-up view of the art life of the time—not only in their account of the new art that was being shown in New York for the first time, but also in their response to the work of the established masters.

In regard to the former—Mr. Greenberg's account of the new art of the Forties—this new edition of his writings amply confirms his reputation as the pre-eminent critic of the New York School. In this first decade of its emergence he seems to have missed very little. As early as 1943, he wrote of David Smith: "Smith is thirty-six. If he is able to maintain the level set in the work he has already done . . . he has a chance of becoming one of the greatest of all American artists." About Jackson Pollock that same year he wrote: "Pollock has gone through the influences of Miró, Picasso, Mexican paintings, and what not, and has come out on the other side at the age of thirty-one, painting mostly with his own brush." About Robert Motherwell's first

2 See "A Critic on the Side of History: Notes on Clement Greenberg," in *The Age of the Avant-Garde* (New York, 1973).

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one-man show in 1944: ". . . he has already done enough to make it no exaggeration to say that the future of American painting depends on what he, Baziotes, Pollock, and only a comparatively few others do from now on." In 1945, on the occasion of Pollock's second one-man show: "the strongest painter of his generation and perhaps the greatest one to appear since Miró." And so on. It isn't at all the case that Mr. Greenberg was especially easy on the artists he admired, either. He could be severely critical—as he was, for example, with Arshile Gorky. Yet when Gorky's *The Calendars* was shown in the Whitney Annual in 1948, he did not hesitate to pronounce it "the best painting in the exhibition and one of the best pictures ever done by an American." That same year —"a remarkably good one for American art," as he noted—he spoke of Willem de Kooning as "one of the four or five most important painters in the country" on the basis of the artist's first one-man show. One could go on quoting from other reviews as well, and we are talking only about the period which ended in 1949—the terminal date of Volume 2.

The figure who looms behind a good many of these judgments—not in the sense of dictating them, for it was never a case of that, but by way of providing a reading of modern art that gave one the essential clues to its further development—is the painter and teacher Hans Hofmann, about whom there are fewer references in Mr. Greenberg's writing in this period than we might have expected. Hofmann is first mentioned in a footnote to "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" in 1939, but his own painting is not discussed until 1945, the year of his second one-man show in New York. When, on that occasion, Mr. Greenberg spoke of Hofmann as "a force to be reckoned with in the practice as well as in the interpretation of modern art," it was an acknowledgement of an influence that had already played an important role in the critic's thinking—an influence duly celebrated two years later in an essay written for *Horizon* on "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture."

> Hofmann will in the future, when the accomplishment of American painting in the last five and next twenty years is properly evaluated, be considered the most important figure in American art of the period since 1935 and one of the most influential forces in its entire history, not for his own work, but for the influence, enlightening and uncompromising, he exerts . . . . Hofmann's presence in New York has served to raise up a climate of taste among at least fifty people in America that cannot be matched for rigor and correctness in Paris or London.

Clearly the critic included himself among the beneficiaries of this influence, and so must we. It may even be that much that we still admire in Mr. Greenberg's writings about art in this period owes something to the fact that as Trotsky's influence—and the influence of Marxism generally—steadily waned, that of Hofmann's "formalist" reading of modern painting continued to cast its powerful spell.

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that it is primarily as a sort of retrospective tip-sheet on the emerging eminences of the New York School that this critical chronicle is of interest now. What has kept Mr. Greenberg's criticism alive is the quality of the thought which he lavished not only on individual artists as he encountered their work for the first time but on the larger artistic and historical issues which their work was found to raise. In this collected edition of the criticism one can see more clearly than before how the famous longer essays—"The Decline of Cubism," "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," "The New Sculpture," and "Our Period Style," all written in the years 1948-49—grew out of these individual encounters with specific objects. However generalized Mr. Greenberg's observations on individual artists, on art history, and on history itself, may sometimes appear to be, they were always firmly anchored in concrete aesthetic experience, and it is another of the strengths of *The Collected Essays* that it makes this internal

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connection between apodictic judgment and aesthetic actuality far more explicit than it has been hitherto. One may still want to quarrel with the judgment, but one knows better now on exactly what basis it has been arrived at.

Another large interest of these volumes is to be found in Mr. Greenberg's writings on European art, and specifically on the School of Paris. The Forties was, of course, the decade in which the decline of Paris as the art capital of the West and the emergence of New York as its successor became an undeniable fact of international cultural life. In Mr. Greenberg's critical chronicle of this fateful decade we do not find a celebration of the decline of Paris—and still less, any gloating over it—but there is no denial of it, either. If anything, his discussion of it—which, characteristically, takes the form of discussing individual artists—is marked by a tone of deep regret. For the art produced in the heyday of the School of Paris remained for him, even in the Forties, a touchstone of aesthetic quality. Again and again in these essays he makes it clear that for him Matisse still loomed as "the greatest master of the twentieth century"—a judgment that was by no means commonplace even in Paris in the Forties—and Cubism remained, as he wrote in 1948, "the only vital style of our time, the one best able to convey contemporary feeling, and the only one capable of supporting a tradition which will survive into the future and form new artists." The intensely serious attention given as a matter of course to Picasso, Bonnard, Chagall, Léger, Braque, Miró, and other luminaries of the School of Paris is itself a reflection of the central place Mr. Greenberg continued to accord these artists. The welcome he gave to Dubuffet in the late Forties, moreover, makes nonsense of any notion that his was a criticism in any way governed by chauvinistic bias.

In this respect, it should be said that the campaign lately mounted by certain Marxist historians to suggest that in the 1940s New York somehow contrived to "steal" modern art from Paris by means of a government-sponsored conspiracy will find nothing in *The Collected Essays* to support what is essentially an exercise in political paranoia (if not indeed an attempt to repeal history itself). To Mr. Greenberg, as to many others at the time, it came "much to our own surprise," as he wrote in 1948, that "the main premises of Western art have at last migrated to the United States, along with the center of gravity of industrial production and political power." His complaint was that Americans were still so piously attached to the prestige of the School of Paris that they could not bring themselves to recognize what was going on in their own country—but this was an aesthetic judgment, not a political one. And the fact that Paris still loomed so large in the eyes of the New York art world, that art produced in Paris still held such unbroken sway over what dealers showed, critics wrote, collectors bought, and museums acquired—all this, too, makes nonsense of the charge that some secret conspiracy was at work to elevate New York at the expense of Paris. The plain truth is, Paris *did* suffer a decline so irreversible that it has not recovered to this day. It is, in any case, against the background of this abiding piety about art in Paris and its corollary—a general disinclination to believe in the importance of American art—that Mr. Greenberg's writings in the Forties about both French and American art need to be read.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that there is much in these volumes on a variety of other subjects that remains of great interest. About the paintings of Arnold Friedman, an American artist only now—forty years after his death—being accorded anything like the recognition he deserves, Mr. Greenberg wrote beautifully and repeatedly. His obituary of Mondrian is still a very moving document:

> [Mondrian's] pictures, with their white grounds, straight black lines, and opposed rectangles of pure color, are no longer windows in the wall but islands radiating clarity, harmony, and grandeur—passion mastered and cooled, a difficult struggle resolved, unity imposed on

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> diversity. Space outside them is transformed by their presence.

About Edward Hopper, too, an artist one hardly expected Mr. Greenberg to have much interest in, he had some very sharp things to say. Also, about Max Beckmann. Reviewing an exhibition of the paintings Beckmann produced in Holland during the Second World War, Mr. Greenberg wrote in 1946 that there were five or six pictures in the show that "warrant calling Beckmann a great artist, even though he may not be a great painter." He then went to say of Beckmann:

> He is certainly one of the last to handle the human figure and the portrait on the level of ambitious, original art . . . . [T]he power of Beckmann's emotion, the tenacity with which he insists on the distortions that correspond most exactly to that emotion, the flattened, painterly vision he has of the world, and the unity this vision imposes—so realizing decorative design in spite of Beckmann's inability to think it through consciously—all this suffices to overcome his lack of technical "feel" and to translate his art to the heights.

On visual art other than painting and sculpture there are likewise some brilliant perceptions. Here is Mr. Greenberg on the photographs of Henri Cartier-Bresson:

> The unusual photographs of the French artist, Henri Cartier-Bresson . . . provide an object lesson . . . in how photography can assimilate the discoveries of modern painting to itself without sacrificing its own essential virtues. One thing that painting since Manet has emphasized is that a picture has to have a "back." It cannot simply fade off in depth into nothingness; every square millimeter of picture space, even if it represents only the empty sky, must play a positive role. This, Cartier-Bresson, like his fellow-photographer Walker Evans, has learned preeminently. At the same time, unlike Edward Weston and the later Stieglitz, he has not forgotten that photography's great asset is its capacity to represent depth and volume, and that this capacity's primary function is to describe, convey, and make vivid the emotional "use-value" of beings and objects. It is to anecdotal content that Cartier-Bresson, rightly, subordinates design and technical finish.

He writes well on the cartoons of William Steig and David Low, too.

Notwithstanding the great variety of subjects that is dealt with in this critical chronicle, we are seldom in any doubt that it is one subject, above all—the emergence of abstract art, which Mr. Greenberg described in 1944 as "one of the most epochal transformations in the history of art"—that lies at the center of *The Collected Essays*. In these first two volumes Mr. Greenberg's response to this "epochal" event, while generally positive and welcoming, remains fluid and analytical. He is fully aware of the aesthetic costs entailed in the triumph of abstraction, and not reluctant to talk about them. If he can already be said to be writing here as a "formalist" critic, he also shows himself to be open to, and even enthusiastic about, a good deal that the formalist criticism of a later generation has shut its eyes to. What *The Collected Essays* of the Forties makes abundantly evident, moreover, is that he is a bigger and more various writer than he has generally been thought to be. This being the case, the future volumes in this series will be keenly awaited.

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The audacity of Emily Dickinson

by Bruce Bawer

One day late in 1881, the young wife of a recently hired instructor at Amherst College wrote to her parents in Washington about her impressions of her new hometown. Among other things, she told them about a mysterious woman who was "the *character* of Amherst":

> It is a lady [she explained] whom the people call the *Myth*. She is a sister of Mr. [Austin] Dickinson [the college treasurer], and seems to be the climax of all the family oddity. She has not been outside of her own house in fifteen years, except once to see a new church, when she crept out at night, & viewed it by the moonlight . . . . Her sister, who was at Mrs. Dickinson's party, invited me to come & sing to her mother sometime . . . . People tell me that the *myth* will hear every note—she will be near, but unseen . . . . Isn't that like a book? So interesting.
>
> No one knows the cause of her isolation, but of course there are dozens of reasons assigned.

The "*myth,*" of course, was none other than Miss Emily Dickinson, who at the time of the young lady's gossipy missive was fifty years old, had never married, and had spent much of her life writing poems, hundreds of them, of which only a handful had been published. Even now, a century after her death (in 1886), critics and biographers, like her Amherst contemporaries, are unable to agree upon an explanation for her refusal, during the last seventeen years of her life, to leave her family's house or to receive visitors. Nearly every Dickinson scholar, however—certain that in the explanation, whatever it may be, lies the key to her mind and character and poetry—has put forward a solution to the puzzle. Clark Griffith, for example, theorizes in *The Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry* (1964) that the poet was emotionally crippled by her tyrannical father, Edward Dickinson, a distinguished lawyer, civic leader, and a one-term representative to Congress. John Cody, alternatively, proposes in *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* (1971) that Dickinson was incapacitated by the conviction that she had been failed, in some way, by her simple, submissive, and affectless mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson. Rebecca Patterson argues in *The Riddle of Emily Dickinson* (1953) that the poet secluded herself because of her friend Kate Scott Anthon's "cruelty"; Vivian R. Pollak, in *Dickinson: The Anxiety of Gender* (1984), argues that she was the victim of "a crisis of sexual identity"; and William R. Sherwood, in *Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson* (1968), maintains that her isolation was the consequence of a supposed affair with the Philadelphia minister Charles Wadsworth. And Ruth Miller, in *The Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (1968), offers what may be the most cogent explanation, given the fact that Dickinson's poetry was the most important thing in the world to

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her: namely, that after having sent her poems for years to two distinguished men of letters—Samuel Bowles of the *Springfield Republican* and Thomas Wentworth Higginson of the *Atlantic Monthly*—and endured the failure of both men to recognize her greatness (while they regularly published the work of stunning mediocrities), Dickinson simply gave up hope of being understood and appreciated in her own time, and withdrew.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff, in her respectable but seriously flawed new critical biography of Dickinson,[1] refrains from overemphasizing her own theory on this matter. Wolff thinks that Dickinson's trouble with her eyesight—trouble that became acute in the early 1860s and abated permanently after a few years—may help to explain her retreat into isolation. But the eyesight trouble, in Wolff's view, was less a real cause than a precipitating factor, an excuse that Emily took advantage of to avoid the sort of events that she had never really enjoyed attending anyway; and once the pattern of withdrawal had begun, it simply developed naturally and by slow degrees. "Vinnie [Lavinia, Emily's sister, who also never married and lived with Emily in the family manse] always claimed that her sister's retirement was 'only a happen'—a slow process, the result not of one dramatic tragedy, but rather of many separate, small decisions."

Actually, when seen in the light of Dickinson's unique perspective on things and her revolutionary concept of poetry—to which I will return presently—the isolation of her last years seems almost an inevitability; how such an extraordinary sensibility managed to come into being in nineteenth-century Amherst, Massachusetts, however, is another question. It is a question that much concerns Wolff, who, by means of an interpretation that is by turns revealing and highly dubious, purports to explain Dickinson's vision and poetics as the product of her familial and religious background.

The lives of her father and paternal grandfather do in fact seem to shed light on Emily Dickinson's life and art. Her grandfather Samuel Fowler Dickinson—a lawyer, politician, and orator of considerable local reputation, and the builder of the "Old Homestead" (the first brick house in Amherst) in which Emily Dickinson would spend her life—was a strikingly obsessive man. Observes Wolff: "The notion of a 'Father' in the Dickinson household—particularly as it related to 'Kingdom' and 'Power' and 'Glory'—was complex and fraught with conflicting emotions." Samuel Dickinson's Amherst was a center of conservative Trinitarian belief at a time when, in many parts of Massachusetts, liberal Unitarianism was in flower. The wealthy, ambitious Samuel, who served for forty years as the deacon of Amherst's West Church, was (in the words of his great-granddaughter) "a flaming zealot for education and religion," a man who wanted "to hasten the conversion of the whole world." To this end, he dedicated several years of his life and the bulk of his considerable fortune to the establishment of Amherst College, a bastion of Trinitarianism that would serve to counterbalance the liberal Unitarianism of Harvard.

Four of Samuel's five sons left Amherst in their twenties to make careers elsewhere, apparently unwilling to compromise their prospects by maintaining too close a tie to their by then financially ailing father; only one son, Edward, remained dutifully in Amherst, where he practiced law like his father and—purely out of filial loyalty—allowed himself to become involved in Samuel's desperate and ill-advised money-making schemes. Not until after Samuel's death in 1838, in Hudson, Ohio (where, having lost his money and honor in Amherst, he was attempting a new start as the treasurer of the newly founded Western Reserve College), did Edward manage to rehabilitate the family's reputation and fortune. He succeeded, furthermore, in becoming what his father had been at the height of his career: the quintessential Amherst public man with a special interest in, and a close

1 *Emily Dickinson*, by Cynthia Griffin Wolff; Knopf, 638 pages, $25.

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relationship to, Amherst College. Yet whereas Samuel had been zealous in his support of the college, and all but fanatically devoted to its spiritual mission, Edward was prudent and circumspect in his dedication, interested in the institution less out of any real enthusiasm for its purpose, it would seem, than out of a sense of civic obligation and family pride. Edward's pet project was the railroad: he was celebrated as the man who brought it to Amherst. "In many ways," writes Wolff,

> the father's force had been surpassed by the son's; in one significant way, however, [Samuel] remained supreme. Nothing in Edward's life could match the emotional and spiritual vitality of Samuel Fowler Dickinson's original vision. Ultimately, Edward's life was pinched and compromised and unsatisfying: he never yielded himself entirely to any beckoning phantom of heroic grandeur, though he seems to have had many poignant glimpses of some glory that might have been; and the ghosts of this drama haunted the Dickinson family throughout the poet's lifetime.

If Emily Dickinson's paternal grandfather had been a man of almost poetic vision, her father was, by comparison, all prose—a proud and self-important man who took politics more seriously than culture and philosophy, his son (who would maintain the ascendancy of the Dickinson dynasty in Amherst) more seriously than his daughters. He was away on business much of the time, and even when he was at home, the Old Homestead was essentially "a house of isolation," in Wolff's words, "a house where the children's independence could be maintained only if easy intimacy and spontaneous affections were sacrificed." Emily viewed her father with both warmth and bitterness, genuine respect and ironic amusement; she once asked Higginson to explain to her "what home is"—as if she had never had one—yet could write to her brother, Austin, that "Home is a holy thing."

Yet, for all her differences from her family she was, at bottom, very much a Dickinson. Her poetry—which unquestionably was far more important to her than anything else in life—was in a sense her version of the Great Dickinson Enterprise, a sort of obsessive visionary project in the tradition of her father's railroad and her grandfather's college; just as Samuel and Edward sought, by their grand acts of civic improvement, to lead Amherst into a better future, so Dickinson sought, by her poetry, to lead her readers to a clearer understanding of the truths of nature. She conceived of herself as having superior insight into these truths—a conceit of which she might never have been capable had she not been the daughter and granddaughter of such assertive and audacious men. (And a conceit, too, that distinguishes her from the Transcendentalists, who felt that all men have equal access to the ultimate truths and partake equally of what Emerson called the Oversoul.) Among the many Dickinson poems that take poetry itself as their theme, and thus help to illuminate her approach to the art, perhaps the following is most famous:

> This was a Poet—It is That
> Distills amazing sense
> From ordinary Meanings—
> And Attar so immense
>
> From the familiar species
> That perished by the Door—
> We wonder it was not Ourselves
> Arrested it—before—
>
> Of Pictures, the Discloser—
> The Poet—it is He—
> Entitles Us—by Contrast—
> To ceaseless Poverty—
>
> Of Portion—so unconscious—
> The Robbing—could not harm—
> Himself—to Him—a Fortune—
> Exterior—to Time—

A poet, then, is a person who can see great truths in ordinary things, truths that, upon disclosure, seem so obvious that we wonder why we never noticed them our-

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selves; so conversant is she with the Infinite that she may be said to live outside of time and beyond the material concerns of this world, sufficient unto herself. Yet the truths she tells should not be presented too bluntly, too directly. Ambiguity is a virtue. "Tell all the Truth," she wrote,

> but tell it slant—
> Success in Circuit lies
> Too bright for our infirm Delight
> The Truth's superb surprise
>
> As Lightning to the Children eased
> With explanation kind
> The Truth must dazzle gradually
> Or every man be blind—

The reference to blindness is significant. Words like *seeing* and *eyes* and *blind* fill her poems, and they rarely carry only their usual meanings. *Seeing* means perceiving the truths hidden in nature; the poet "sees," and she enables her readers to "see" as well.

Dickinson's definition of the poet is clarified in another poem:

> Esential Oils—are wrung—
> The Attar from the Rose
> Be not expressed by Suns—alone—
> It is the gift of Screws—
>
> The General Rose—decay—
> But this—in Lady's Drawer
> Make Summer—When the Lady lie
> In Ceaseless Rosemary—

This poem, perhaps better than any other, succinctly summarizes Dickinson's poetic theory. The lesson of its first stanza is that there are essential truths ("Oils") in nature that do not communicate themselves to most people automatically; rather, they must be distilled from nature, as attar is distilled ("expressed," or pressed out) in a screw press, by the conscious action of a person with a particular gift—that is, a poet. Yet, as the second stanza of the poem makes clear, the art of writing poetry is superior not only to that of the distiller of attar, but to that of the God Himself who created the rose. For a real rose will decay when summer passes; but a rose that exists in a poem—specifically, in *this* poem—will preserve summer forever, even if it remains in the poet's drawer, where no one will see it. The poet may be dead and buried, resting in a grave under a bed of rosemary, but because she has left the poem behind she will lie in the "Ceaseless Rosemary" of remembrance ("Rosemary: that's for remembrance"—*Hamlet*).

As she can turn out longer-lasting roses than God, so she can turn out two sunsets to his one (and more portable sunsets, for that matter):

> I send Two Sunsets—
> Day and I—in competition ran—
> I finished Two—and several Stars—
> While He—was making One—
>
> His own was ampler—but as I
> Was saying to a friend—
> Mine—is the more convenient
> To Carry in the Hand—

Yet if she can compare herself (favorably) to God in some poems, in others she characterizes the poet's role more modestly, even touchingly:

> This is my letter to the World
> That never wrote to Me—
> The simple News that Nature told—
> With tender Majesty
>
> Her message is committed
> To Hands I cannot see—
> For love of Her—Sweet—countrymen—
> Judge tenderly—of Me

Indeed, in the following poem, she presents the poet as a mere slave of nature, whose function is to supply the "oil" to light nature's "lamp":

> The Lamp burns sure—within—
> Tho' Serfs—supply the Oil—
> It matters not the busy Wick—
> At her phosphoric toil!

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The Slave—forgets—to fill—
The Lamp—burns golden—on—
Unconscious that the oil is out—
As that the Slave—is gone.

Thus even after the poet ceases to write (and, for that matter, even after her death), the "Lamp" continues to "burn"—that is, the poem continues to speak to the world.

Through poetry, then, Dickinson sought to gain immortality. But it was a special sort of immortality: she would perish and her poems would live. The metaphor of lights and lamps and wicks reappears in another poem:

The Poets light but Lamps—
Themselves—go out—
The Wicks they stimulate—
If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns—
Each Age a Lens
Disseminating their
Circumference—

The light of poetry, in other words, endures even longer than that of lamps; it is eternal, like the sun. The word *circumference,* it should be noted, is extremely important to Dickinson. In a letter to Higginson, she notes elliptically, "My Business is Circumference—." An examination of the poems in which the word appears suggests that she adopted it as a sort of umbrella term to designate at once all the varieties of infinitude—Immortality, Eternity, Heaven, the endless vastness of space and time—all of which seem incomprehensible to us, and seem at the same time to surround and overwhelm us, here in our finite world. In the above poem, Dickinson makes it plain that poetry itself partakes of circumference; as a poem passes from generation to generation, it presents the mortal beings who read it with a glimpse of eternal things.

Apparently, by telling Higginson that her business was circumference, Dickinson meant that she saw it as her function to mediate between the known and the unknown, between the limited and the limitless. She was fascinated by the notion that just beyond the homely things of this life lay a magnificent, mysterious, and immutable Hereafter; the idea of immortality obsessed her (it was, she wrote Higginson, "the Flood Subject"). One poem after another touches upon the contrasts between the brevity of life and the amplitude of historical time, between the humble stillness of the grave and the promised circumferential glory of the Afterlife. A poem that begins by contemplating the graves of anonymous housewives concludes as follows: "And yet, how still the Landscape stands!/How nonchalant the Hedge!/As if the 'Resurrection'/Were nothing very strange!" And another poem strikingly captures the antithesis between the passivity of death and the vibrancy with which life charges on through the centuries:

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—
Untouched by Morning—
And untouched by Noon—
Lie the meek members of the Resurrection—
Rafter of Satin—and Roof of Stone!

Grand go the Years—in the Crescent—above them—
Worlds scoop their Arcs—
And Firmaments—row—
Diadems—drop—and Doges—surrender—
Soundless as dots—on a Disc of Snow—

Since her role, as she saw it, was to describe the infinite world, and the only language available was one that had been designed to describe a finite world, Dickinson resorted to symbolism. In her poems, she assigned new (and not necessarily consistent) meanings—meanings associated with the passage of time, the journey from life to death, and the visionary power of the poet—to words like *morning, day, sunrise, bird, sun, flower, purple, flag, victory, kingdom, crown, monarch, jewel, gem, pearl, snow, sea,* and *music.* These double meanings are often based upon the Trinitarian doctrine of "type" and "antitype"—the belief, in other

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words, that certain phenomena on earth foreshadow events in the hereafter. The idea that the coming of morning prefigures the awakening on Judgment Day, for example, informs several Dickinson poems:

> Will there really be a "Morning"?
> Is there such a thing as "Day"?
> Could I see it from the mountains
> If I were as tall as they?
>
> Has it feet like Water lilies?
> Has it feathers like a Bird?
> Is it brought from famous countries
> Of which I have never heard?
>
> Oh some Scholar! Oh some Sailor!
> Oh some Wise Man from the skies!
> Please to tell a little Pilgrim
> Where the place called "Morning" lies!

Here (as in many Dickinson poems) the Pilgrim is a traveller not from England to Plymouth, but from this world to the other. Similarly, in the following lines, the ascent of a soul into heaven is "coronation," while those who remain back on earth are "peasants": "Smiling back from Coronation / May be Luxury— / On the Heads that started with us— / Being's Peasantry—."

If Dickinson's poetry concerns itself with the paradox of life after death, its method, too, partakes heavily of paradox. Dickinson typically combines exotic diction and hyperbolic imagery with a severely spare style and a refreshingly colloquial tone; in most of her poems, she borrows the characteristic meter of Christian hymns ("common meter," with alternating four- and three-foot lines) in order to say things that many "good Christians" might consider blasphemous. She combines a romantic's love of beauty and truth and nature, and a natural gift for piety and devotion, with a sharp (though exquisitely controlled) sense of irony and a profound awareness of the inexcusable evil of which both men and their Maker are capable; she combines an Emersonian Transcendentalist's conviction that all the essential truths are contained in nature, ready to be perceived, with a poetics based upon the anti-Transcendentalist notion that only some men—poets—are capable of perceiving those truths. In an age when Americans were becoming less interested in religion, though they continued to pay it lip service, she combined a Puritan's seriousness about death and salvation with a truly subversive attitude toward Trinitarian orthodoxy. Indeed, she writes about man and God, sex and death, this world and the other, romantic love and Christian belief, in identical ways, and often in terms of one another, so that in some poems ("Wild Nights—wild nights," for instance, or "Title divine—is mine!") it is not clear—and perhaps is not supposed to be clear—whether her theme is religious fervor or sexual ecstasy. She personifies objects of nature and, conversely, represents people as natural objects; she describes simple objects with an unmistakable reverence for their innate holiness, and brings grand abstractions down to earth by talking about them as if they were people or places one could find in the Amherst town directory or on a map. Take, for example, the opening stanza of her most famous poem of all, in which the narrator—as in many Dickinson poems—speaks, as it were, from beyond the grave: "Because I could not stop for Death— / He kindly stopped for me— / The Carriage held but just Ourselves— / And Immortality."

To write such a poem was an act of imaginative liberation; it was to redefine God's world in her own way, to illuminate his mysteries by rendering them from her own perspective, in terms of the world she knew. This preoccupation with redefining explains why so many of her poems take the form of definitions:

> "Hope" is the thing with feathers—
> That perches in the soul—
> . . .
> Exultation is the going
> Of an inland soul to sea,
> Past the houses—past the headlands—
> Into deep Eternity—
> . . .

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Experience is the Angled Road
Preferred against the Mind
By--Paradox—the Mind itself—
Presuming it to lead
. . .
Publication—is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man—

Her dictionary, to which Dickinson refers several times in her poetry and letters, gave her the accepted definitions of words; these poems presented her own definitions. She saw herself as audacious, and audacious she was: God provided the Bible, man her lexicon, and she in her poetry spat back her own versions of both. Many of her poems, as a matter of fact, are direct responses to, wholesale rewrites of, or witty elaborations upon texts both sacred and secular. "Essential Oils—are wrung—," for instance, was inspired by a sentence in Higginson's essay, "Letter to a Young Contributor": "Literature is attar of roses, one drop distilled from a million blossoms."

Cynthia Griffin Wolff places great emphasis upon Dickinson's audacity. It is her thesis, in fact—and she rides it tirelessly—that Dickinson, though she never did convert, nonetheless consciously perceived poetry as a means of wrestling with God, on her own ground and on her own terms. (The theory compels Wolff to regard an obscure Dickinson poem, "A little East of Jordan," which is about Jacob's fateful wrestling match, as something of a touchstone for the entire oeuvre.) There is, to be sure, some truth in this characterization; many of Dickinson's poems, far from being conventionally reverent, often challenge God pugnaciously, describe him as cold and uncaring, and generally take his name in vain: "Of Course—I prayed—/And did God Care?" And doubtless Dickinson's dichotomous view of her father influenced the mixture of disparagement and reverence, love and rage, with which Dickinson's poetry regards God. In Dickinson's poetry, as Wolff observes, "rage is entirely separated from 'my father, Edward Dickinson': it finds expression only in the poetry, directed toward a 'Father' in Heaven Whose face we never see and Whose voice we never hear." In a letter to Higginson, Dickinson writes of her father that "His Heart was pure and terrible and I think no other like it exists." She might well be speaking of God.

This is not to suggest, of course, that to Dickinson God was a rhetorical device, a stand-in for an earthly father against whom she could not bring herself openly to rebel. Far from it. Throughout her life, the deity was a searingly real presence to Dickinson. Though the power of Christ was fading elsewhere in the country, in Amherst the old-time religion remained strong; the Dickinson children attended church regularly, read the Bible daily, and, at the Amherst Academy, followed a curriculum of which religion formed the core. But churchgoing and Bible-reading and religious education were not considered sufficient. All good Trinitarians were expected, at some point (often, but not necessarily, as the result of a local religious revival or a death in the family), to undergo a "conversion experience" and tender a public "profession of faith." To convert, one had to accept one's subordination to God, had to set aside reason and logic and independent thought of all kinds when they conflicted with the Word of the Lord. The Biblical prototype (or, to use the Trinitarian jargon of the day, the "type") of the convert was Jacob, who had wrestled with the Lord at Peniel (Genesis 32:24, 26) and won "a royal estate" for his sons in return for his eventual submission. As Jacob had wrestled with God, so every Christian, it was felt, must face God (and his own conscience) in a confrontation, and emerge having lost his autonomy but having gained Life Everlasting. Yet, though virtually everyone around Dickinson eventually bowed down before the Lord, and though her letters demonstrate that she was sorely troubled by her own inability to do so—particularly during the Great Revival of 1850, in which her father and Lavinia were both converted—Dickinson never succumbed. Just as she chose never to take a husband, Dickinson refused to become the bride of Christ; if

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God would not give her immortality, then her poetry would do so.

For Dickinson was simply too much of an intellectual, a thinker, to be able to put aside independent thought and submit herself entirely to God. Certainly the idea of faith preoccupied her; but she battered her own faith with questions and doubts, and it continually wavered. She could write that "To lose one's faith—surpass/The loss of an Estate—/Because Estates can be/Replenished—faith cannot—," and could describe faith as "the Pierless [*sic*] Bridge/Supporting what We see/Unto the Scene that We do not—/Too slender for the eye." But she could also write, with a fine, scientifically savvy wit, that

> "Faith" is a fine invention
> When Gentlemen can *see*—
> But *Microscopes* are prudent
> In an Emergency.

Ultimately, independence—from both man *and* God—seems to have been a necessary condition of life to Emily Dickinson. In a number of her poems she writes about self-sufficiency:

> On a Columnar Self—
> How ample to rely
> In Tumult—or Extremity—
> How good the Certainty
>
> That Lever cannot pry—
> And Wedge cannot divide
> Conviction—That Granitic Base—
> Though None be on our Side—
>
> Suffice Us—for a Crowd—
> Ourself—and Rectitude—
> And that Assembly—not far off
> From furthest Spirit—God—

In her own way, Dickinson was as much of a lone trailblazer as any Western homesteader of her day, as dedicated a practitioner of self-reliance as any disciple of Emerson, as zealously monomaniacal a visionary as her grandfather Samuel.

Wolff's thesis, then, strikes one as valid, and relatively fresh. But the idea of Dickinson as a battler against God, in its broadest sense, is hardly original: William R. Sherwood, to cite just one critic, speaks of Dickinson's poetry as an act of self-assertion, "a movement of resistance against God and man, a campaign of guerrilla warfare, subversive and underground, that countered brute and blatant power with covert wit." And the picture of Dickinson that results from this concentration upon the idea of poet-as-wrestler is a distorted one. The poetry is simply more varied in its tone—and, specifically, in its attitude toward God and the Hereafter—than Wolff wants us to believe. Dickinson is alternately irreverent and worshipful, skeptical and secure in her belief; sometimes she bemoans her solitude, employing prison, cage, and coffin metaphors, and sometimes she celebrates it; she is by turns angry, joyful, afraid, ironic, morose. The Dickinson in whom Wolff would have us believe is tiresomely predictable in her concerns and monotonous in her approach.

Nor does it help that, after devoting 150-odd pages of this supposed critical biography to portraits of the poet's grandfather and parents, to discussions of life in nineteenth-century Amherst and of the theory and practice of Massachusetts Trinitarianism, and to the childhood and schooling of the poet, Wolff turns to Emily's adult life and makes it clear at once that she has no intention of going into the subject. "Dickinson's 'life,'" Wolff explains, "served her poetry precisely in its simplicity, in the *absence of significant event*." Therefore, "as the woman becomes Poet, biography must shift its principal focus from the person to that Voice of the verse, for it was in her poetry and not in the world that Emily Dickinson deliberately decided to 'live.'" Having thus justified her failure to chronicle the poet's life, Wolff proceeds, for most of the remaining three hundred or so pages of the book, to explicate one poem after another. This procedure might not be so unfortunate, except for the fact that Wolff chooses so many

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mediocre poems, leaves out so many important ones, and repeats herself so terribly much—and all because she is mainly interested in supporting her argument that Dickinson was the poet-as-wrestler.

Wolff's discussion of the poet's childhood, moreover—a discussion upon which her entire reading of Dickinson is based—consists largely of dubious and utterly speculative psychoanalytical theorizing. For instance, Wolff maintains (and her only real evidence is that Emily Norcross Dickinson was shy and uncommunicative with adults) that the poet's mother failed her during the child's "preverbal stage." "When mother and baby are able to engage successfully in nonverbal communication," Wolff writes, "the infant will derive immense emotional strengths from the process . . . . When this stage of communication is skillful and loving, the infant learns to feel good both about her mother and about her own emergent self, acquiring a fundamental sense that the universe is on the whole benign." The result is "a strong and confident sense of self, an ability to interact gracefully with others, and the conviction that the world is a good place." If the mother botches it, however, the child emerges with a weak sense of self, an inability to sustain relationships, a fear of separation from loved ones, and a sense that the world is "governed by an indifferent or hostile God." What's more, when the child learns to talk, he may construe the switch from visual to verbal communication as a "Fall into Language," "verbal discourse seeming a second-best alternative to some other, loosely defined, transcendent intimacy" that he has never been able to achieve—with the result that he may nostalgically "overvalue *seeing* (as opposed to saying)." Strangely enough, however, "just because language has been forced to perform so critical a task in the early life of such an infant, verbal formulations may also seem to have a unique sovereignty. No Power will compare to the Power of the Word." To be sure, this hypothetical case history seems to jibe well enough with the known facts of Dickinson's life; but there are simply too many *unknown* facts about Dickinson's life to permit such an analysis. Wolff concludes her foray into infant psychology by saying that it was as a result of Dickinson's "Fall into Language" that "words became her refuge and her one great love." But what about the poets whose mothers did not deprive them of affection, and who grew to love words anyway? And what if Dickinson's mother had not deprived her of love (assuming that Wolff is right about this)—would Dickinson never have become a poet?

Sometimes it seems as if the dissemination of inane ideas in nearly self-parodic jargon is Wolff's specialty: "In sum, [Dickinson] wanted to make the terms of existence that were meaningful to the Voice of her poetry relevant to the terms of existence by which her readers defined their own lives—whoever those readers might be, in no matter what time or place. And the miracle is, she succeeded." Frequently, when she is speaking of Dickinson's wrestling match with the Lord, Wolff's rhetoric is overheated. She describes the poet as "fashion[ing] [a] destiny of heroic conquest for herself," of "engag[ing] in an Armageddon of her own making against the God of death," with "Kingdom, Glory, and above all Power" as her "wagers." Sometimes Wolff's view of Dickinson is so skewed that one feels as if one has stumbled into the wrong seminar:

> [I]t was grandeur, only grandeur—and Power—that Dickinson wanted. She wanted to be America's Representative Voice, and she wanted that Voice to challenge God Himself and wrestle for dominion. Yet even Emerson, in his greeting to Whitman, had welcomed the younger poet to a "great *career*." By the mid-nineteenth century, poets had to content themselves with precisely this kind of success—circumscribed and limited to this world. What would it have meant to Emily Dickinson to be merely a published poet, perhaps even a *minor* published poet? With the vision of transcendent heroism that she had formulated, how could Emily Dickinson settle for a "career"?

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Clearly Wolff is misreading here, is interpreting Dickinson's rhetoric about poetry and immortality in too literal-minded a manner. Certainly Dickinson did not want to be America's Representative Voice in the way that Whitman did; rather, she wanted to be a voice of nature, indifferent to international boundaries and historical divisions.

In truth, it is Wolff, not Dickinson, who is preoccupied with the supposed ugliness of materialism and careerism in late nineteenth-century America. She has opinions about America's history and culture and wants us to believe that Dickinson felt the same way she does. She suggests more than once, for example, that in the difference between Samuel Dickinson's visionary faith and Edward and Austin's prosaic concern with business and politics, Emily Dickinson must have seen an emblem of a major nineteenth-century shift for the worse in American character. The only certainty here, of course, is that *Wolff* sees such a parallel and such a shift—which she attributes, one might add, to the fading of religious enthusiasm and the advent of the Gilded Age. She describes mid-to-late-nineteenth-century America as "a diminished thing" (not only using the phrase from Frost's "The Oven Bird," but also borrowing the poem's title for her prologue), and says—in what is patently a projection of her own romantically conceived political opinions onto her subject—that "It was the end of our glory and the beginning of our sorrow that Emily Dickinson could see in Amherst, Massachusetts, during those years surrounding our Civil War." But Wolff seems a bit inconsistent on this topic, ridiculing Edward Dickinson on one page for not being bold enough to become a *really* big business success, and faulting him on the next page for "driving hard bargains and living ostentatiously." And though she is patently charmed by the mythic glory of Samuel Dickinson's fervent Christianity, she seems to find the religion itself inimical.

Finally, and perhaps most oddly of all, Wolff comes across as blaming Edward Dickinson for the "subordination" of women prior to the age of Gloria Steinem. After quoting his view that the education of men and women should be based upon an assumption of equal ability as well as upon a recognition of their different roles in society, Wolff gripes: "If it is 'best' to assume that in the 'natural abilities' women *are* 'exactly equal' to men, why ought their 'sphere' be 'different from that of men'?" A valid question, to be sure, but what is it doing in a biography of Emily Dickinson?

But then, of course, this 638-page tome is not really a biography of Dickinson; rather, it is a work of literary criticism—part Freudian, part biographical, part feminist, part archetypal—which is sometimes illuminating and intelligent and often foolish. Perhaps its fundamental defect is that Wolff is not enchanted by Dickinson so much as she is enchanted by an idea about Dickinson. One cannot help but wonder what Emily Dickinson herself—who dealt in tiny poems about great truths—would have made of this bulky farrago of misconceptions.

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Sacred monster
by Dan Hofstadter

Monstre sacré: an extraordinary personage; one who breaks the mold.
—*Grand Dictionnaire Encyclopédique Larousse*

In the last year or so, about a hundred drawings by J. A. D. Ingres from various collections in France and the United States have been assembled and placed on view in New York. They have come in waves. The first was an exhibition at the Frick Collection devoted to an Ingres portrait owned by the museum, the *Comtesse d'Haussonville.*[1] For this show Edgar Munhall, senior curator, rounded up Ingres's preliminary studies for the picture of the Countess and wrote a fascinating catalogue (also profusely illustrated) on the genesis of this masterpiece. The image is a sort of hymn to womanhood in which one fictive instant represents the transition from nymph to matron of a young patrician lady. Mr. Munhall's text explores many of the purely historical and anecdotal as well as aesthetic aspects of the picture, a suitable approach in light of the sitter's place in society. Born Louise de Broglie, she belonged to one of the most important families in French history. Mr. Munhall has explored some of her connections, chiefly her sense of spiritual kinship with a distinguished grandmother, Madame de Staël, and to this one wishes only to add that she was almost certainly the granddaughter of Madame de Staël's paramour, Benjamin Constant; also that she was the collateral ancestress of two of the most brilliant of modern French thinkers, the physicists Louis and Maurice de Broglie.

The second collection of Ingres drawings also came accompanied by a splendid catalogue.[2] This show, originally mounted in Houston by Avigdor Arikha, was limited to the role of spontaneous draughtsmanship in Ingres's day-to-day practice. Lodged like its predecessor in the Frick's basement, the exhibition received relatively little public notice. This was a pity, for even in our age of "blockbuster" accumulations we must still judge art by its quality, and Ingres's drawings remain among the finest ever produced, equaled only by those of Holbein, Piazzetta, Degas, and a few others.

The third group of drawings was at the Pierpont Morgan Library.[3] Here a broad

1 "Ingres and the Comtesse d'Haussonville" was on view at the Frick Collection from April 29 through June 15. Edgar Munhall, who organized the show, also wrote the catalogue (144 pages, $25).

2 "J. A. D. Ingres: Fifty Life Drawings from the Musée Ingres at Montauban" was on display from May 6 through June 15. The catalogue, by Avigdor Arikha, was published by the Houston Museum of Fine Arts (114 pages, $25).

3 "Nineteenth-century French Drawings from John S. Thacher and Other Morgan Collectors" was shown at the Pierpont Morgan Library from September 2 through November 9. It was organized by Cara Denison, the curator of the Department of Drawings.

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selection of nineteenth-century French works, by several different hands, was presented; the ones by Ingres composed only a part of it, though these in their virtuosity naturally predominated. Seeing Ingres in this context, we could sense how deeply his draughtsmanship was studied by Degas, the last great atelier painter, yet how remote it is from the visual memoranda of Millet, one of the first of the rambling sketchers of "the people." At the Morgan, Ingres was placed in perspective as a man of the nineteenth century.

That century has left us many appreciations, by no means all of them positive, of his achievement. Of these the oddest is surely a remark by the "fantasist" painter Odilon Redon to the effect that Ingres "created monsters." Now Redon, if anyone, would have known, for he made monsters himself; he *liked* them. His admission of Monsieur Ingres into the charmed circle of unnatural paternity was thus commendably generous, but it was also disconcerting to prejudice: one did—one still does—have this fixed notion that Ingres's was a classical vision of the human form, the very last to admit any outrage to the antique canon of beauty. If by the word "monsters," however, one chooses (with the aid of a dictionary) to understand merely "curious phenomena"—in Ingres's case, the products of an indulgence toward the mildly misbegotten, or of a measured forcing of proportions—one can begin to grasp what Redon meant.

So: imagine Mlle. Louise Vernet, the subject of a celebrated pencil drawing in a private collection, suddenly come to life precisely as Ingres depicted her: one's hair would stand on end. The eyes are unnaturally far apart (a typically Ingresque distortion), the head exaggeratedly ovoid, the folded arms of gazelle-like length; the damsel's waist passes just beneath her armpits, and is only slightly wider than her broad columnar neck. Most striking of all is her complete absence of shoulder, as if her torso had been turned on a lathe like a bowling pin; and this bowling-pin look, which was all the rage at the time, is cleverly assisted by her high lace collar and bouffant muttonchop sleeves. The sum of such whimsies of dressmaking and draughtsmanship would surely amount to a "monster" if ever realized in the round, yet the picture on the page is one of piquant loveliness. Ingres caught Mlle. Vernet in 1835, in Rome, as he was preparing to succeed her father, Horace Vernet, as director of the Villa Medici. He made her look, in a word, *ethereal*—any amplification would only muddle the simplicity of one's impression. It was, I suspect, just this conceptual simplicity that allowed Ingres to take such liberties with his model. He could get away with extreme strokes of characterization, it appears, if they conspired to suggest a single dominant attribute.

I mention this in reference to an interesting notion proposed by Mr. Arikha. In his catalogue essay, he suggests that Ingres in his portraits tended to focus on a single telling quality, much as if he had consciously resolved that every likeness should say but one thing. Each such visual formulation, says Mr. Arikha, was "a sort of metaphorical snapshot." Ingres waited two years, for example, before M. Bertin, subject of a famous oil portrait of 1832, happened fortuitously to strike the right attitude. It was over coffee; in Mr. Arikha's words, the painter "suddenly got up, approached his model, and whispered in his ear, 'Come pose tomorrow, . . . your portrait is done.' There is something unique in the pose, urgent, but also a sort of metaphor . . . ; wisdom, symbolized by the white hair, is the dominant of this painting." In the great female state portraits, the *portraits d'apparat,* Mr. Arikha often finds a similar governing trope; for Mme. Gonse, austerity; for Mme. Moitessier, worldliness; for Mme. de Senonnes, luxury. The ethereal pencil portrait of Mlle. Vernet, though not among the drawings displayed at the Frick Collection, offers perhaps the best spectacle of extreme distortion in the service of a ruling quality, and one naturally wonders whether Ingres merely forced this quality upon his likeness (as Baudelaire declared he was wont to do) or subtly perceived it in his sitter. As it happens, Hans Naef, in volume three of his

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monumental *Bildniszeichnungen von J. A. D. Ingres* ("Portrait Drawings of J. A. D. Ingres"), has composed a documentary picture of Louise Vernet, who would live only a decade more and be greatly lamented at her death. He has found a letter from an acquaintance of the family comparing Louise's face to "that in an antique cameo, purified by I know not what reflection from Raphael's Madonnas"; while another correspondent described her as "an apparition, . . . [who] unites in her person the beauty of classical statuary and the charm of the medieval Virgins." So much, then, for Baudelaire—as far as this case goes.

The problem of Ingres's "monsters," of his departure from the notion of ideal beauty, can be better understood if we leave it hanging for a moment in order to gain a broader insight into his view of the role of drawing in art. And here again the second Frick exhibition was especially helpful. The show's central concern appeared already in its title: "Fifty Life Drawings from the Musée Ingres at Montauban"; make no mistake, the accent was decidedly upon "life." Mr. Arikha is himself an artist who firmly believes in life drawing, and what he did was to enlist Ingres's draughtsmanship in the defense and illustration of that venerable practice. Montauban, it may be noted, is Ingres's birthplace; it is a charming red-and-white market town not far from Toulouse (in whose orchestra the young Ingres played second violin). Perched above the River Tarn, the rather grim Musée Ingres holds over three thousand of the master's drawings; on its mortifyingly shiny floors I once spent a morning squeaking about under the reproving eyes of the guards. Except for my travelling companion I was entirely alone, which fact may furnish telling testimony, if any is needed, that life drawing no longer commands much interest in our civilization. Gallery shows of drawings from life are exceedingly rare in New York, and few of our artists still follow the motto that Ingres made his own: *nulla dies sine linea.*

Ingres was a man who preferred nature to art, nature being understood as the sum of what we see, with emphasis on people and animals. Nature was divinely plain or self-evident; it was "imagination itself," as Blake put it, not cryptic or coded, as we tend to see it today. That is why the work of Ingres's predecessors, the Greek and Roman and Renaissance masters, struck him with the force of revealed truth. "All is known, all is found," he would say; "the ancients did not create, they recognized"; "I shall become great by imitating." One unsettling consequence of this philosophy was that Ingres, fertile though he was in original, proto-modern visual ideas, displayed a cordial scorn for modernity and all its works. Still more challenging, perhaps, is the implication that in order to really see Ingres one must begin by really seeing nature; for if nature is lost upon one, so too, surely, will be art. To grasp Ingres's meaning requires not so much understanding as, precisely, *recognition*; one must bring a certain store of visual memories to the experience of an Ingres drawing, and even then all one's hard-won observantness is more than likely to be rebuked for its poverty by the master's bounteous perceptions.

The choice of Ingres drawings at the Frick was evidently offered, however, in the liberal hope that one might nourish oneself with more than this notational aspect of the artist's draughtsmanship. Not only can one follow Ingres as he registers nature—a landscape, a dog, a horse's hindquarters—but also as he attempts to preserve the intimate quality of such notations while expanding them into major compositions. The viewer was granted, into the bargain, a peek at Ingres's lifelong friend, Jean-François Gilibert, and at his pretty, plump wife, Madeleine, to whom the artist asked to be presented on the evidence of her beauty in a portrait—so great was his faith in the power of likenesses! Most intriguing of all, one could look beyond such schoolish subjects as accurate representation and figure-group composition to some of the less obvious impulses in Ingres's pencil work: his innate

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respect for emptiness, for white spaces; his extraordinary instinct for what to finish and what to leave unfinished; his half-conscious knack for creating new kinds of spatial rhythms out of the strewing of studies or fragments across a page; and, perhaps most important, his desertion of the academic notion of ideal beauty in favor of the anxious, touching sort of personal recording that became unique to him.

Ingres's art was a layered affair. Highest in order of formality were the history paintings and the grand portraits, which he strove mightily to consider as history paintings too. Next came the commissioned likenesses in pencil, of which the artist produced fewer and fewer as he grew more financially independent; the Morgan Library exhibited a superbly witty example of this mode in the *Portrait of Guillon Lethière,* wherein the distinguished ex-director of the Villa Medici, his frothy head up-piled on his collar like a mountain of shampoo bubbles, twinkles out at us in convivial pomposity. The lowest and to me most interesting layer consists of the thousands of studies—bits of nudes and drapery, armor and accessories—that were in such striking evidence in all three shows. There is a physicality to these pieces that is wonderfully reviving; the sheer passion that Ingres invested in his daily hours of eye-hand coordination, the flashes and cascades of his self-disdaining virtuosity, make me feel that all our latter-day aversion to bravura drawing is nothing really but prudery—nothing but a cloak for our envy of our forebears' high animal spirits. In Ingres's life sketches all sorts of impulses—including a fair measure of what can only be perceived as sexual distraction—break free; compared to the willed order of his major figure paintings, these fragments of form seem often to well up out of the unconscious, or out of some animal habit of assertion deep within the body. Sometimes, indeed, Ingres seems to me half-beast, a centaur perhaps, for beneath all his rational intelligence and stylistic culture echoes something like the thunder of hooves. The ancient centaurs were revered as teachers and so too was Ingres, but what he taught, in deed if not in word, is that some things only the body can teach—that drawing from life is not only a record of nature but also an agency of it.

For all that, there is in Ingres a kind of physical courtesy, a delicate stepping-around-things like that of a well-trained thoroughbred or a sagacious cat. Mr. Arikha offers a "Study of a Dog" (apparently an Alsatian, facing left) as an instance of Ingres's tact—it is almost personal kindness, really—toward his white page. The drift of light across the dog's domed skull is established by three white or scarcely inflected negative spaces on the dog's brow, but unless one is analyzing the drawing one doesn't see them as such, but rather as positive and protuberant. In fact, they quite make the form. Though we feel the whole dog's presence, only about half of his bulk is actually delineated; here and there the outline softens to a sordino faintness, entirely vanishing in several places, and the interchange of white space and open contour locks the dog into the page. One of Ingres's students, the Viscount Henri Delaborde, published some remarkable volumes of reminiscence (including one containing Ingres's own writings) a few years after his teacher's death; one quality that Delaborde deeply admired in Ingres was his unparalleled feeling for what might be called "relative definition." Mr. Arikha quotes Delaborde on the drawings' "blend of extreme facility and firm exactitude, the deliberate unfinishedness of certain parts setting off the careful execution of others; in short, the perfect harmony between the approximate and the absolutely defined." This sense of relative definition is, of course, one of the chief qualities that distinguish the real draughtsman from the fellow who has merely learned how to make a detailed and accurate drawing. It is very close to what some artists mean when they talk about a draughtsman's "attack," and Mr. Arikha seems to feel that Ingres may have derived it in part from his music. Ingres played his fiddle—his proverbial *violon d'Ingres*—his whole life; checking his virtuosity, he tried

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earnestly to do justice to whatever score he was reading. Once he played a duet with Liszt; "Quelle verité dans le sentiment!" exclaimed the pianist when they had finished. In drawing, Ingres's flexible attack was fortified by his faith in what his hand could achieve almost on its own; but it was not enough in this, his chosen métier, to "do justice to the score," that is, to nature: he had also to do justice swiftly. His speed and his economy live on embedded in his drawings; he trusted us to sense them. Perhaps the true draughtsmen of every age have had to shield precisely this trust against the prolific tribe of the pedant-renderers, the people who, having no confidence in our perspicacity as viewers, "put in everything." With Ingres's drawings it is otherwise; they ask of us that we acknowledge them as performances, as acts of temperament.

The Frick show contained several drawings from a set of studies for the figures in *The Golden Age* at the Château de Dampierre. One wispy, linear sketch of a pair of dancers is a harbinger of Matisse; "the entire plane," as Mr. Arikha comments, "is activated." Offhandedly, as if sotto voce, Ingres avails himself of three devices to achieve this "activation": he creates two curious negative shapes in the margins between the dancers and the edges of the page; he leaves a larger, more distinctive negative shape "in reserve" between the two dancers; and, lastly, he refrains from quite finishing either contour, so that the white page flows into them and they are locked (like the Alsatian dog mentioned earlier) into the page.

Elsewhere we can behold Ingres adding a whole new dimension to the aesthetic of sketchiness (that art-historical development which usually goes by the unhappily pretentious designation, "the aesthetic of the *non finito*"). I am not sure that this was quite conscious, but no matter: many of Ingres's best ideas probably weren't. This dimension is partly conveyed by the master's capacity to set rhythms in motion by spreading fragmentary studies of the same object across the page, but that is not all there is to it. For centuries artists had elegantly carried off this feat; it took Ingres to imbue it with a proto-modern expressiveness. In several studies for the *Vow of Louis XIII,* he mixes up clusters of studies and pentimenti (primarily of women's legs) with the aim of arriving at a design for a pair of angels who, in the finished composition, will draw aside a curtain to reveal the king's vision. The resultant amalgam, a potpourri of modeled limbs in alternative poses together with plain contours, frank pentimenti, and all the negative shapes thereby implied, creates an articulated space, a musical structure, that has its own poetic existence apart from the legs themselves. It is not an "abstraction," because it really is a depiction of legs, but it does presage the incorporation of the temporal dimension—the way that forms can somehow propose themselves as memories—into early modern painting. A wonderful example of this early modern use of the sketch aesthetic may be found in Matisse's *Nasturtium and Dance,* which happened to be one of the paintings from the Hermitage in Leningrad recently on display at the Met. As we contemplate this work we are at once beguiled into a "Proustian" mood by the fact that it is a depiction of an earlier picture called *Dance,* which we half perceive through the foliage of a potted nasturtium sitting on a sculpture stand. The earlier picture had, of course, to be entirely recast—especially in its colors—for this glamorous reprise, but the real delighting bewilderment comes when we notice an overpainted phantom of the topmost dancer striking through the blue background color and also realize that a leftover bit of some provisional green, now covered over, is still vividly—almost barbarically—in use as part of the final image of the dancer (a little to the right of the phantom). This sensation that a work is telling us how it was made, even flaunting or regurgitating its apparent faults, has become an expected part of looking at much of twentieth-century art.

We are now in a better position to grasp the eccentric quality of Ingres's art. It is, of course, a very minor aspect of his vast life-

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work, but it has especial interest for us today. In essence, what has puzzled many viewers ever since the early nineteenth century is how or why the finest French draughtsman since Watteau, a man who thought nothing of producing several hundred detailed studies for a major figure composition, could have persisted in retaining certain "errors" or willful distortions of drawing through every stage of picture-making and on into the finished work. Ingres's eye was superb, and he counted several highly trained painters among his associates; yet these peculiarities were allowed to persist to the end. Among those most often remarked upon are Thetis's goitrous neck and "starfish hand" in *Jupiter and Thetis,* the bizarre bust of Mme. Panckoucke in the portrait of that name, the capricious anatomy of the Grande Odalisque, the astonishingly long thighs and arms of Mme. de Senonnes, the sausagey physiognomies of the concubines in *The Turkish Bath,* and the "starfish hand" (once again) of Mme. Inès Moitessier. The list could be easily extended, and might even include an example from the Frick's *Comtesse d'Haussonville*; the Countess's right forearm is disproportionately long, and the knuckles of her left hand are disposed in an almost straight line and not in a shallow arc, as knuckles are in reality. Doubtless it was such vagaries as these that moved Odilon Redon to utter his naughty quip about Ingres's "monsters."

There are many reasons, I believe, for Ingres's elastic approach to the art of drawing, and all of them are instructive. In diverse ways they reflect his assumption that drawing is an act of temperament, not of reasoned craftsmanship, and so not wholly subject to correction. The governing metaphor of a portrait, for instance, had far more weight with him than the sitter's actual measurements. Mr. Arikha tells us that one day, when Ingres found several of his students drawing from the *écorché,* a standard plaster cast of a "flayed man" that shows the muscle groups, he said to them: "You'll lose all faithful respect for nature, the painter's most important quality, and the most precious, which is naïveté." Reading this, we are not at first quite certain whether the master was talking about one quality or two; but on reflection we realize that in Ingres's mind the respect for nature and the respect for one's naïveté must have been indissociable. What a student drew under the pure fire of enthusiasm had most likely a certain rightness to it, like a lyric sung with tears in the eyes; he could "correct" it only at his peril. Certain of Ingres's supposed errors, then, must simply be seen as the marks of his *own* naïveté. "Love me, love my dog," he implicitly demanded, and it's little wonder that he found so much beauty in paintings that most of his contemporaries still thought to be rather hideous: Gothic things, things by the "Italian primitives" of the early Renaissance.

The issue of Ingres's naïveté is confused by the fact that he did not, in any case, subscribe to what he called "the mistaken notion of ideal beauty" ("ce qu'on appelle à mal propos le beau idéal"). Ingres was trained by the neoclassical painter Jacques-Louis David, who in Rome, in 1779, had struck up a friendship with Quatremère de Quincy, the codifier of the theory of ideal beauty and later a friend of Ingres's; thus it has often been casually assumed that Ingres himself was striving to flesh out some pre-imagined Platonic conception of form. Mr. Arikha reminds us, however, that Ingres in fact believed that our conception of beauty derives from nature as we actually see it (*le beau sensible*); and as we read along in Ingres's *Notes et Pensées* we suspect increasingly that his penchant for "breadth," for long leading lines, came from his preference for those natural forms that have "firmness and plenitude, and in which details do not compromise the aspect of the big masses" (or, it might be added, impede the fluidity of the artist's hand). Yet "significant details," even if grotesque, were perfectly acceptable if they furthered the aim of expression. Over and over, people have complained that Ingres's fondness for what they call "photographic detail" assorts uncomfortably with his classicizing, and therefore generalizing,

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intentions. But Ingres's modeling is no more "photographic" than Holbein's or Bronzino's; the error here lies in assuming that continuous tone (that is, a smooth or blended surface) is analogous to photographic tone, whereas in actual fact Ingres's gradations resemble nothing that could ever turn up on a photographic plate: they are too grand, too simple, despite their manifold inflections. I think that Ingres magisterially brought off the accord between, on the one hand, large masses and areas of saturated color, and, on the other, the modulation of surface and texture: indeed, this is the chief reason that he may be accounted (with Poussin) one of the two brightest stars in the firmament of French painting. It may be true that he compromised in this way his classicizing program, but to compromise one's program is not necessarily to compromise one's paintings; quite the contrary. Though Ingres himself believed that he was working in a classical vein, that is not sufficient reason for us to believe it, much less to weigh his achievement in the scales of classicism.

Most of Ingres's drawings were working drawings, stepping-stones toward finished designs for large figure groups. To consider his draughtsmanship in the most comprehensive sense is perforce to consider the order in his paintings, especially in their treatment of space. Yet here, too, he continued to deviate from academic norms, so much so in fact that the contemporary observer may question whether his handling of space and volume is more usefully considered as an extension of classicism or simply as something else—something unique to him. It is at times hard to remember that he thought of himself as an emulator of Raphael, living much of his life in the vicinity of Raphael's greatest works and brooding and brooding upon their mysterious harmonies. Ingres spent over twenty years in Italy: from 1806 to 1820 in Rome, from 1820 to 1824 in Florence, and from 1835 to 1841 in Rome again, this time as director of the Villa Medici. He was so deeply and continuously engrossed in the lessons of the Stanze, the Loggie, and the Arazzi (the tapestry designs) that he may as justifiably be considered a successful extender of the Italian Renaissance as a forerunner of Parisian modernism. To browse in Ingres's writings is to discover an adulation of Raphael so intense that one wonders how he ever swerved from that master's example in any way at all. "Alas," he lamented upon leaving Rome for the second time, "I could not say farewell to Raphael without weeping hot tears, like a child!" How rudely surprised he would have been to learn that posterity would prefer his portraits to his figure groups, and find many of the latter egregiously un-Raphaelesque. The great joke on Ingres in this regard may be that his express homage to the Umbrian painter, the canvas of 1814 entitled *Raphael and the Fornarina,* was based on a portrait of 1516, the *Fornarina* in the Galleria Borghese, which was then thought to be by Raphael but since has been re-attributed by some connoisseurs to his Mannerist pupil, Giulio Romano. In fact, ever since the "rehabilitation" of Italian Mannerism in the second decade of our century, certain writers have drawn striking parallels between this sixteenth-century artistic tendency and the drift of Ingres's lifework. The more casual among them seem to imply (in accordance no doubt with that most useful of Italian maxims, *se non è vero, è ben trovato*) that a direct influence is detectable; more circumspect observers take note of the many formal resemblances between Ingres and certain Mannerists (especially Bronzino) and simply leave it at that. Actually, though there is plenty of Mannerist painting in both Rome and Florence, it is difficult to establish what Ingres saw, much less what he liked. He must, of course, have studied the nonclassical works of the great classical masters themselves, such as the *ignudi* of the Sistine ceiling or Raphael's design for the tapestry of *Paul Preaching at Athens*; but what he thought, for example, of Daniele da Volterra's altarpiece in Trinità dei Monti—the wonderful *Deposition* which Poussin had so greatly admired—we shall

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probably never know; we know only that he saw it, because in 1817 he was commissioned by the French government, which owned the church, to execute, for one of its chapels, a *Peter Receiving the Key of the City* (completed 1820); and also because he made a drawing (now in the Musée Bonnat at Bayonne) of himself painting *Romulus* on a scaffold in the nave. As far as the Mannerist art in Florence is concerned, Ingres could not have missed Pontormo's *Deposition* in S. Felicita or his *Madonna* in S. Michele Visdomini; and he clearly appreciated Bronzino's cool portraiture and very likely his decorations in Eleanora of Toledo's Chapel in the Palazzo Vecchio. The Mannerist designer about whom Ingres actually wrote, however, was Giulio Romano; after visiting the Palazzo del Tè he declared that Giulio had come closer than anyone else to re-creating the painting of antiquity. This remark strongly suggests that what Ingres most fancied in the decor of that famous Mantuan pile was not the seismic violence of the Hall of the Giants but rather the somewhat insipid archeological decorations in the Hall of Psyche; and though there are definite echoes of this sort of scholarly designing in some of Ingres's own compositions, we may be heartily thankful that there aren't more.

So the Mannerist influence on Ingres remains a matter of conjecture. There exists nonetheless a sort of morphological parallel between the laying-aside of classical modes by the disciples of Raphael, Michelangelo, and Andrea del Sarto and Ingres's drift away from classicism after he left David's atelier. Just as one detects a certain similarity between the disillusionment of educated Frenchmen after the final collapse of Napoleon's imperial dream in 1815 and the anguish of cultivated Italians following the sack of Rome in 1527, so does Ingres's invention of new kinds of composition in the early nineteenth century recall the expressive ventures in the early sixteenth of Giulio Romano and Perino del Vaga (both of them former assistants to Raphael), Rosso Fiorentino (a former student of Michelangelo), and Jacopo da Pontormo (an ex-protégé of Andrea del Sarto). One of the constitutive qualities of classical figure composition is that separate structures or scaffoldings distinguish surface arrangement and recession in space. Whatever is sinking back into deep space cannot too closely catch up the colors or rhythms of those things nearer to the picture plane: if one imagines a classical painting as a collection of "wings" and "flats" disposed frontally and parallel to one another on a receding stage, then no one of them should ever be confusable with any other by reason of tangency, like coloring, or similarity of outline. If, however, we consider the decorations by Perino del Vaga in the Palazzo Doria in Genoa, especially the one known as *The Fall of the Giants,* we see that most of the contours of the fallen giants in the lower right-hand side flow into one another, destroying any sense of perspective or recession; here spatial articulation has been assimilated to surface design. The same thing happens with the harem girls in Ingres's *Turkish Bath.*

It is another characteristic of the classical style that draperies should generally show the effect of gravity upon their folds without revealing much of the tactile quality of the fabrics used. By way of example, I can remember standing once in the Hall of the Raphael Cartoons in the Victoria and Albert Museum and trying to figure out what sort of textile could possibly behave like the habiliments of Raphael's Apostles; I think my rather silly conclusion was that they were all wearing heavy, slightly humid wool. For really these robes can only be viewed as abstract or ideal vestments. By contrast, in Jacopo da Pontormo's fresco of Tuscan rustics in the lunette of the Great Hall of the Villa Medicea at Poggio a Caiano, we remark an intense affection for the actual feel of soft clothing. Jacopo's winsome peasant girls look out at us with an air of sensual complicity, much as do Ingres's Mmes. de Senonnes and d'Haussonville, and it is a curious fact that Vasari's alarm at the hypersensitive naturalism of the Poggio fresco was repeated, in substance, by nineteenth-century critics of Ingres's portraiture.

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Writing of Pontormo's decoration at Poggio, S. J. Freedberg has stated that each shape is "transformed into a [subtle] image of Jacopo's sensitivity to it." And indeed all the traditional craft required to depict, with exacting decorum, the gestural rhetoric expressive of a given figure's role in a given story has here been set aside in favor of a naturalism of personal sensibility. Pose and flesh and drapery seem interesting no longer as elements of a public communication but in and of themselves, inch by tremulous inch. They have become so many vessels for the painter's feelings about their appearance—including purely accidental effects of texture and reflected light. When Ingres later says that he seeks not *le beau idéal* but *le beau sensible,* he is airing a preference quite similar to Pontormo's.

One commonly hears that the first generation of Italian Mannerists, the students of Raphael, Michelangelo, and Andrea del Sarto, "forsook" classicism in the pursuit of an "anticlassical" form-language.[4] Yet it might be more accurate to speak of a classicism absently mislaid. These young men venerated classicism, they venerated their teachers; but once they had set out on their own they enthusiastically followed their unique formal interests until their efforts were projected not so much "against" classicism as simply "beyond" it. With David and his pupil Ingres the story is repeated, and it is here that the morphological parallel becomes most intriguing. How is it, one wonders, that the classical style, so widely recognized as the center of gravity of all Western art, the single artistic idea by whose light we continue, willy-nilly, to interpret all the rest—how is it that no more than one generation of major artists at a time has ever cared actually to *practice* this style? Can it be that classicism is one of those ideas whose nature it is to flare up brightly and briefly, like a votive candle, only to die away as if self-consumed?

One doubts, in the end, that Ingres *needed* any exposure to the nonclassical art abounding in Rome and Florence to digress into the painting of personal sensibility. Perhaps the classical style, on account of its great objectivity and its one-sided maleness—its high demands upon the will—could never have quite fulfilled his intuitive and receptive nature. Perhaps, too, all unawares, he found its clarity unlivable, like a house with walls of glass, and its light as wounding as a high unchanging noon. So much of this style was *known,* was part of the world of knowledge; armed with this knowledge, Ingres would have had to lie in wait for himself, and thus might well have come to feel as if he had never left home. Deep down he did not want to paint solely by the illumination of the ancients, but also, as the Italians say, "by the light of his nose," and as he followed his nose he started to stray, to cut across boundaries. Insisting on the musical rightness of his drawings and designs even when they seemed a bit "monstrous" to others, he step by step enlarged his personal turf, his strategic hinterland, until he had created a whole world whose compressed space and saturated color would greatly impress both Picasso and Matisse in the first years of this century. Looking over his drawings eighty years later, we discover again that even a master's "errors" are—masterful.

4 It is of course also true that the great re-inventors of classicism forsook this style themselves on occasion. I have already mentioned Michelangelo and Raphael in this connection; Andrea del Sarto and Jacques-Louis David could be added to the list.

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Thomas Bernhard and the German literary scene

by Amity Shlaes

One of the more contentious moments in the contentious history of German letters occurred some fifteen years ago in an argument over a theater emergency light. A play about the evil side of creation called *The Ignorant One and the Insane One* had begun its premier run at the 1972 Salzburg Festival. In the final scene, a diva, fresh from trilling Mozart's "Queen of the Night" aria, drops into despair as she converses with her hopelessly alcoholic father. The soprano mutters her apocalyptic lines—"Light is a curse . . . exhaustion, nothing but exhaustion"—and the stage directions call for a dimming set. But while the Festival association had no trouble with a gloomy stage, it balked at the demand that every bulb in the theater hall be extinguished. A bitter fight ensued, and all performances after the first were canceled. The playwright himself fired off an angry telegram, calling the officials' action a "breach of confidence without example." For his work, dimming spotlights didn't suffice.

Things just can't get black enough for Thomas Bernhard, the Austrian author whose work caused the trouble in Salzburg. For more than a decade, Bernhard has depressed audiences from Vienna to Wiesbaden with his pained portraits of modern existence. One of the leaders of a post-1960s group that brought a vogue of absurdism to the German literary scene, he has produced some eighty works, a collection of poetry, plays, and prose whose theme might be summarized as "life is a prison or madhouse." Sick and insane characters people Bernhard's creations—in a 1970 play, for example, fifteen cripples roll around the stage in wheelchairs. Bernhard's subject is also the violent frustration inherent in creation, the dismemberment of the soul that he feels accompanies every artistic attempt. "[I]nstead of thinking about my book and how to write it, as I go pacing the floor," he notes in a single-sentence preface to one of his novels, "I fall to counting my footsteps until I feel about to go mad."

Bernhard's dark vision hasn't gone unrewarded. His books win the automatic attention of West German, Swiss, and Austrian feuilletonists. As the winner of the Austrian National Prize, the Bremen and Georg Buechner prizes, and the Grillparzer Prize, he stands out as one of the most decorated authors in postwar European literature. And the German-speaking public gets frequent chances to see his plays produced in their lavishly subsidized theaters.

Now the republication of several volumes of Bernhard's fiction—*Gargoyles, The Lime Works,* and *Concrete*—along with the appearance of a memoir, *Gathering Evidence,* makes it possible for the English-reading public to acquaint itself with him. Although these are by no means the only important works in the author's oeuvre, they are—like most of his prose—littered with autobiographical details, and they give a good picture of the terrors that stalk the Bernhardian landscape. To read

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them is to inspect the sunless, cramped world of the postwar Central European soul.[1]

The first cause of Bernhard's pain seems familiar enough; he had a rotten childhood. *Gathering Evidence,* which consists of five novella-length memoirs, details the unhappy episodes of Bernhard's youth. He was born in 1931, the illegitimate son of a young woman who had fled her native Austria in shame to deliver him secretly in a Dutch convent. The young Thomas learned early that life wasn't a pleasant affair. "You're worthless, you've destroyed my life," his mother told him. Bernhard's maternal family, which had once enjoyed a middle-class existence of Empire furniture and large houses, was now made up of itinerants, shuttling between poor Upper Austria and rural Bavaria.

School tortured Bernhard, a bed wetter and a problem child. Only his eccentric grandfather, a frustrated writer and former anarchist who as a youth had sported a pince-nez and moved in the same Swiss circles as Lenin, provided some respite. The crowning blow in Bernhard's agonized childhood was a case of pleurisy, which, through a combination of bad luck and medical negligence, became infectious tuberculosis, eventually causing the need for gruesome surgical procedures that rendered Bernhard for the rest of his life a lung patient in the style of the invalids of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain.*

Beyond relating a sad story, though, *Gathering Evidence* performs a vicious postmortem on life in Catholic, Nazi society. Bernhard's grandfather warns him what to expect in school. "Mind you," he tells the six-year-old, "teachers are idiots." But neither the child nor we are ready for brutal teachers and camp counselors who hang children's soiled bedsheets up at breakfast for all to see and insist that even cripples raise their crooked arms in the Hitler salute. As a teenager, Bernhard attended a Salzburg school whose humiliations matched—and are reminiscent of—those of another infamous school, the academy of Robert Musil's *Young Toerless.* The despairing children pitch themselves off one of the city's hills, the Moenchsberg, onto the asphalt street below. The author recalls: "I know of a number of burials at the Communal Cemetery and the Maxglan Cemetery where boys of thirteen, fourteen, fifteen or sixteen . . . were unceremoniously *dumped in the ground* for in the strictly Catholic city suicides were naturally not given a proper burial . . . ." Suicide actually seems a natural enough response to the "National Socialist Home for Boys," whose sadistic warden, named Gruenkranz, vilified the suicides publicly after their deaths. Bernhard himself is forced to practice his violin in a dark closet lined with rows of stinking shoes.

One of the bigger demons in the author's hell is the town of Salzburg, which is such a horrifying place that it's hard after reading *Gathering Evidence* to think of it as Mozart's infant home. After an air raid, for instance, the adolescent Bernhard steps on what he thinks is a soft doll's hand, only to discover moments later it actually belongs to a dead baby. The teenager never dares to call on his many relatives in Salzburg because he anticipates the cold reception a poor relation will find at their doors.

Salzburg's musical tradition doubtless helped build the fine sense of music that permeates Bernhard's works. (He actually studied in a conservatory there in the hope of pursuing a full-fledged career in music—but his ill health prevented it.) But generally Bernhard's assessment of Salzburg is harsh—almost to the point of caricature. Before the war it is "a dead museum of beauty," and

1 *Gathering Evidence: A Memoir* is available in a translation by David McLintock (Alfred A. Knopf, 340 pages, $19.95). *Gargoyles* (translated by Richard and Clara Winston, 208 pages, $6.95), *The Lime Works* (translated by Sophie Wilkins, 241 pages, $7.95), and *Concrete* (translated by David McLintock, 156 pages, $5.95) are available in paperback from the University of Chicago's PhoenixFiction series. They were published in 1970, 1973, and 1984 respectively by Knopf.

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after the war it is no better. When he returns to his hated boarding school on a visit, he finds that a rigid Catholicism has replaced the rigid National Socialism of his adolescence. "[T]he only difference I could see was the replacement of Hitler's portrait by the cross of Christ and of Gruenkranz by [another warden] Uncle Franz."

Salzburg is the capital of a provincial world that provides the setting for Bernhard's dank and violent fiction. The monotony of the Styrian countryside—"I will say nothing of small towns, where everything is grotesque," Bernhard writes at one point—is the subject of *Gargoyles.* The novella traces the path of a young engineering student and his physician father as they move, on a doctor's day of rounds, from one deathbed to another. The morning begins with the examination of an innkeeper's dying wife—a drunk miner has dealt her a fatal blow the night before—and ends with a walk by the side of an insane prince whose monologue, lasting more than a hundred pages, hovers unrelentingly over the topics of suicide and madness. The father and son also stop at the home of a diabetic magnate who lives in incestuous isolation with his sister, and they visit with three brothers who have just spent hours twisting the necks of a collection of pet birds.

All these house calls have the gory, surreal quality of Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird,* where peasants plunge spoons into each others' eyes and corpses are devoured by starving rats. The house calls also share a philosophical side with the work of another Central European, Franz Kafka. Like the doctor in Kafka's short story "The Country Doctor"—who tells a dying child "your mistake is you have no perspective . . . your wound is not so bad"—the doctor in *Gargoyles* sees pain as relative. "It would be wrong," he explains to his boy, "to refuse the fact that everything is fundamentally sick and sad." As the narrator follows his father on his final call, to the prince, they ascend the region's tallest hill. The youth seems to be about to escape the squalor of that morning's patients; he expects a beautiful, mind-widening panorama. The view doesn't disappoint him—"It actually was a view for hundreds of miles in every direction"—but the prince is as mad as the doctor's more proletarian patients. Rather than close in a formal fashion, the book trails off as the prince talks himself into exhaustion. Nothing improves.

An agonized intellectual of the prince's sort is the sole subject of *Concrete,* a novel about a man trying to complete an essay on the composer Felix Mendelssohn. Denser than *Gargoyles* or *Gathering Evidence, Concrete* is aptly named. Its form, a single, 152-page paragraph, makes it difficult to penetrate. Rudolf, the narrator, is an isolated artist, an invalid scorned by his conventional sister and tortured by writer's block. The story begins with an ultimatum: by the 27th of January at "precisely four in the morning," Rudolf will begin to put words on paper. But *Concrete*'s subject instead becomes procrastination, and by the end of his meditation Rudolf has forgotten, it seems, even what it means to see something through to completion. He passes hours thinking obsessively about his sister, a caricature of the Austrian upper-middle class who deals in real estate and loves all Wagner operas but *The Flying Dutchman,* which, she feels, isn't really Wagner.

In such acid-edged portraits of cultural pretention is to be found some of the best of Bernhard's writing. But the principal subject of *Concrete,* like that of many of Bernhard's writings, is an intense psychological claustrophobia. Rudolf wants to escape his parochial life, but the country's capital spells death for him: "The trouble is that the atmosphere of the city can't be endured for any length of time, and quite apart from this the doctors had told me early on that for me Vienna had *the most harmful climate of all.*" *Concrete* leans on us with all the airlessness of the postwar European salon. Rudolf sometimes leaves the country, but he goes only to resorts popular with Germans. In Venice, he actually stays at the Bauer Gruenwald, a hotel with a German name. Even abroad, he can't escape or create.

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If the short *Concrete* is Bernhard's fugue on artistic impotence, *The Lime Works* is his symphony on the subject. Here again we find a fanatic. Konrad (he has no other name) has spent decades driven by his need to produce a mysterious, definitive work, "The Sense of Hearing." Although this man is a scientist, he faces the same creative frustrations of Bernhard's other protagonists. In search of a good site for his study, he moves himself and his invalid wife into the desolate, abandoned lime works in a village called, appropriately, Sicking. A bloody murder begins the book: the scientist has shot his crippled wife's head off with a Mannlicher carbine she keeps by her wheelchair. The rest is a retrograde history of the scholarly agonies that led to the violence. Konrad tortures his feeble wife with monotonous aural experiments for his project. He repeats single phrases into her ear for hours, and she, a kind of nutty Eliza to his cruel Professor Higgins, has to describe how they sound. Konrad's log of the research gives a taste of its monotony: "For some time now he had been experimenting with consonants, until it became impossible to experiment further with consonants, whereupon he switched to vowels, then suddenly back to consonants, and so forth."

The Lime Works was published in 1970, twelve years before *Concrete,* and it is far angrier. It offers an exquisite analysis of a diseased inventor. On the one hand, Konrad's perfectionist discipline has rewarded him with a real gift. "It was a triumph, after all, to hear absolutely everything, in consequence of his rigorous training in the course of decades of trouble . . . ." On the other hand, it prevents him from completing his work. Konrad thinks "of the favorable time in Brussels or in Mannheim or the even more favorable time in Merano or Deggendorf or Landshut, it was only that he had been unable to utilize any of them, at the right moment everything was always ready, but one failed to utilize it, most people never managed to utilize the uniquely favorable moments in life, though this was not much of a consolation to him . . . ."

What keeps these litanies of despair from tipping into the ridiculous—they usually don't—is the solid blocky intensity of Bernhard's prose. Rarely have the blunt syllables and phrases of the German language worked so well to convey absurdity and frustration. "Puder, Puder, Puder" ("powder, powder, powder"), barks Konrad in a moment of fury at his invalid wife's obsessive habit of powdering herself. Bernhard's long, organic works—at only twelve paragraphs, *The Lime Works* is nearly as massive as the single-paragraph *Concrete*—read like chunks of prose hewn from a pained consciousness. Bernhard vacillates between telling events straightforwardly and describing his memories of them. "[T]his," he writes of his uncle's death, "like everything else I record here can only be indicated." His work thus shares some of the dreamy quality we find in the best of Milan Kundera and Elias Canetti, although Bernhard's vision, unlike theirs, remains relentlessly dark—closer to a nightmare.

Although he is said to prize his Austrian identity, Bernhard, in his pessimism, is a German's German. In the nearly twenty-year period since the obscure music student and poet was first noticed, some one thousand articles on him have appeared, from essays on his relationship with the "blue flower" poet Novalis to linguistic analyses of his sentence structure and vocabulary. One scholar counted the appearances of the word "forest" (there were twelve of them) in a passage of Bernhard's prose in order to prove, among other things, how Bernhard's syntax reinforced the philosophical task of "exploring something unexplorable."

There's hardly a dark modern author Bernhard hasn't been compared with—Sartre, Beckett, Musil, Kafka, Thomas Mann. A handsome man—in some photographs he looks a bit like a friendly brother of the actor Klaus Maria Brandauer—Bernhard poses like a café dandy for book jackets and magazine interviews, but in general he lives a reclusive life in the Austrian countryside. He regularly expresses scorn (usually communicated via telegrams or letters to news-

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papers) at the honors he has received, but in most cases this proud aloofness has only served to enhance his reputation as a committed artist. "The situation is delicate," one fearful admirer wrote in a speech in 1970. "Our task is to honor and praise an author to whom honors don't mean much."

One source of Bernhard's pride is his plays, which in the late 1960s marked him as one of the new, revolutionary voices in postwar German theater. He is best known for a series of absurdist works in the Brecht-and-Beckett mold, which became especially popular in the overpoliticized post-1968 scene. Bernhard's debut in the big-time was *A Party for Boris,* the wheelchair work which could be classed under the theme "the abnormal is the norm," or "the world is madness." When it was presented to the publisher Suhrkamp, it caused a sensation in the house—reportedly the publisher's readers at first didn't even recognize it as a play. It earned Bernhard the Grillparzer Prize, awarded every three years in Austria for the best play. Bernhard's other theater pieces—there have been nearly twenty of them—frequently return to his favorite subject, the futility of the creative process. To this theme Bernhard brings a death-obsession and fatalism so absolute that they make even the more dour works of someone like Eugene O'Neill seem lighthearted and unpredictable. Musical rehearsal is the metaphor in *Force of Habit,* one of Bernhard's more compact plays. This time the pained genius is a circus director who's been forcing his troupe—a clown, a juggler, an animal trainer, and his own granddaughter—to practice Schubert's "Trout" quintet for the past twenty years. "The truth," says maestro Caribaldi, "is that I don't like the cello, it's torture for me, but it has to be played. My granddaughter doesn't like the viola, but it must be played. The clown doesn't like the double bass, but it has to be played, the animal trainer doesn't like the piano, but it must be played, you don't like the violin, either. We don't want life, but it has to be lived."

Marcel Reich-Ranicki, one of Germany's more conservative and older critics, has been among the few to judge Bernhard harshly. As early as 1969, in an article in *Die Zeit* headlined "Corpses on Sale," he remarked that Bernhard's death-obsession in the end "has only a comical effect." There is some truth to this observation. *Force of Habit* is a grim, repetitive exercise, but Caribaldi's ironic commentary on his group's pathetic efforts does make us laugh. The final touch comes at the end, when a radio in the background mockingly airs a professional version of the quintet. Bernhard's other plays, too, can be funny in a way the books aren't, mostly, perhaps, because absurdist medicine is swallowed better when delivered in one-liners than in the author's elephantine paragraphs. The author himself sometimes becomes the butt of the joke. In *The Theatermaker,* for example, a pompous stage dean on the road with his masterpiece in the provinces gets picky about an emergency light, just as Bernhard and his producer did in Salzburg.

The problem with all these plays, though, is that they feel derivative. Bernhard studied Artaud and Beckett, and his plays are often "German" reworkings of postwar existentialist theater. From inside the Federal Republic of Germany, or Austria, or East Germany, this may seem original, even explosive. Who wouldn't react to a version of *Waiting for Godot* in his private idiom? The citizens of Augsburg, for example, got mad when the playwright called the Swabian capital "musty" in *Force of Habit,* and announced they were considering legal action to protect its reputation. But for those not born on the Danube or Rhine, Bernhard too often remains too much the German student of the great originals. Why see *Force of Habit* when we can see *Endgame*?

And there's another difficulty. When Bernhard isn't imitating others he is repeating himself. As the critic Georg Hensel put it in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,* "Before Thomas Bernhard decides to invent something new, he squeezes out the old once again." *The Theatermaker,* for example, treats the same maddening monotony we encountered in *Force of Habit.* And Bernhard rarely strays far from the story of his own life.

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In the play *Peace Over All the Mountaintops* (the title comes from a famous poem of Goethe's), Bernhard introduces a postwar German master—"Meister" is even his name—who, like Bernhard, has come to great fame late in life. The work is a clever jab at the idolization of German literary figures of the past. There are moments of great humor as the author's wife rehearses to herself his series of literary honors and as the Meister ruminates on the importance of a classical education and his relationship to past masters. He likes to pick at the vulnerable corners of his idols' work, Goethe's scientific studies, for example. "Goethe was absolutely wrong about bees," he notes smugly. Particularly funny is the character of a young disciple of the Meister's who embodies the sycophantish habits of literary hangers-on. But for those of us who aren't in on the jokes about the etiquette between German authors and publishers parts of the play are a bit elusive, and the rest is oddly unanchored in contemporary life. As the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* critic noted: "The play is subtitled 'a German poet's day in 1980,' but it is really a German poet's day in 1890."

Bernhard is far from alone among German playwrights in his obsession with Teutondom's distinguished literary progenitors. Few peoples erect such tall monuments to their writers as the Germans do. Directors constantly mount new productions of old plays, but even more popular recently have been productions which, like *Peace Over All the Mountaintops,* seem to be *about* literary fame. Thus in the winter of 1982 in Berlin it was possible to see a rewritten version of a Franz Lehar operetta about Goethe's early love for a pastor's daughter in Strasbourg, a new play about the end of Goethe's affair with a Weimar official's wife, Charlotte von Stein, and a formal, mannered, one-man reinterpretation of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther.* Such intense interest in their masters is in part due to the excellence of German education: Germans who have been through the gymnasium share a grounding in the classics unlike anything our college graduates have ever known. But this excessive worship of literary predecessors creates its own problems, especially when it is directed toward figures of the recent past. Contemporary European theater still hasn't gotten over Beckett and Brecht, for example. The fires of Brecht's didactic, unaesthetic philosophies at one point raged so strongly that Peter Handke, another Austrian, felt the need to write a piece entitled "Horvath is Better than Brecht," praising a socially concerned but non-Marxist playwright.

Although Bernhard owes a lot to the old Austrian writers, he too is indebted to Brecht: his plays are incessantly didactic. Thus Bernhard has adapted his own pained posture to the over-politicized environment of the European artistic world. He has been quick to take up popular political themes, although it must be said that *de rigueur* attacks on favorite targets are often the best of the lot. A play called *Before Retirement,* in which a set of aging siblings makes a ritual of celebrating Himmler's birthday, is one of the most devastating of many works on the Nazis' residual presence in the German judiciary. Bernhard regularly vilifies his own countrymen in his work. The novel *Concrete* describes a place where "a corrupt state and a corrupt church join forces to pull at the endless rope which, with the utmost ruthlessness and callousness, they have for centuries wound round the neck of a blind and stupid people . . . ." Austria is the "unconscionably filthy public lavatory of Europe." And now that Austrians have made Kurt Waldheim their president, Bernhard's angry ironizing about Austria has a new resonance. In *Peace Over All the Mountaintops,* Bernhard presciently parodied an attitude toward Jews current in Austria and Bavaria: "The annihilation of the Jews was a big mistake, but it was an unsolvable problem," says Bernhard's Meister. "The Jews themselves are also guilty of a lot . . . but one shouldn't have done what one did . . . ."

Frequently, though, Bernhard's political salvos seem fairly random. Sometimes he gets it wrong, and sometimes he gets it right:

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he has equated both the postwar Austrian state and the East German government with the National Socialist regime. Fortunately, politics come second to art in Bernhard's world view. Under Isaiah Berlin's well-known classification, Bernhard would be a hedgehog, an artist who knows only one big thing—in this case, the dark side of life, with its attendant frustration and violence—and knows it well. It is for this reason that *The Lime Works,* although it is the hardest to read, is the most original of the volumes available in English. It presents the best picture of the pain of artistic discovery. As the book ends, Bernhard describes the art of writing in this way: "fearlessness in the face of realization, of concretization, fearlessness, simply, when it comes to turning his head over, suddenly, from one moment to the next, ruthlessly flipping it over to drop everything inside his head onto the paper, all in one motion."

Such revelations serve their purpose. They open a door to the depths of the artistic process—a door many of us would prefer to keep closed. But the rest of this author's work is too tangled in the minutiae of the German-Austrian world to be of much use. And there is a certain repetitiveness that is itself restrictive and frustrating. Our problem with Bernhard, really, is his own problem with the music of his Vienna: "[I]t very soon has nothing more to offer to anyone in search of what is new and therefore really interesting . . . . It was always the same orchestra, and good though they were—and are—I have always had the impression—and still have—that the orchestras always play the same things, even though they in fact played different things, and still do."

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The weather on Patmos is just fine

by Elias Friedensohn

Christmas Day: Amsterdam

Lectori Salutem:
There is that anxious moment of isolation in every trip when I wonder what I am doing there . . . wherever it is. Museums burdened with the past seem suddenly absurd and pompous, the Gothic cathedrals bastardized, and the grand plazas made only for political strutting. The façades of old houses are impenetrable blanks; smoking buses, honking taxis are muted and distanced by the fog. The water in the canal is black and forbidding.

People in the streets walk securely on native ground. But I am footsore and weary, no longer responsive to antique seductions. In or out of the museum, the Dutch are in their world. They are inside the Dutch house in the de Witte painting on the museum wall. There, kitchen doors open upon inner yards and again into other rooms. Before me are endless duplications of interiors in which figures move and disappear behind doors, down corridors, behind drapes, into the shadowy depths of mirrors. They are inside, preoccupied; they are indifferent to my spying eye and deaf to the sound of my artistic mourning. In the grayness even the rectilinear precision of the landscape extends itself like an exhausted Mondrian lying flat, drained of color.

To allay anxiety, I make notes. I make notes to escape, to be in another time, to think as they did, to see as they willed me to see. I stand at the door, a voyeur, hoping for a glimpse. I remain outside, as usual.

The museum: an artist's lament

Only the sound of my steps on the polished floors mars the museum's silent compression of time. A decade passes in twenty paces, a century in three galleries. The tempo slows as I grow weary, speeds as I lose patience, stops still when I am suddenly caught by excitement. Before Geertgen's *Man of Sorrows,* I feel a bizarre urge to shake hands. In front of Ter Borch I am stirred by the pearl earring nestling against a flawless, perfumed neck. How long did I listen to the mournful sound of the clavecin being played by the woman in de Witte's painting? The guard stands before the *Night Watch* singing operatic arias off-key while he tries to fix me with his pleading eyes. *The Night Watch. The Syndics. The Old Woman Reading. The Jewish Wedding. A Self-Portrait.* And I am undone.

In the silent past of the museum I do not hear the heated argument in the ale house. I do not hear war. The museum gives to the past a pristine clarity which it never had. Paintings are ordered chronologically. Artists are grouped together and the geography made plain. I see their work through a glaze of art-historical readings spiced by our era's prejudices and failures of belief.

For the Flemish painters the emphasis was not on a revolutionary distemper, as it so

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often is with us, but on the contemplation of a seemingly inexhaustible past—a past that produced perfections worthy of being faithfully copied. Their present continued and expanded the Gothic dream of an ordered universe recorded in all of its grandeur and complexity: touched by the finger of God. The church monitored and resisted change. The guilds zealously guarded the constancy of craft. And not less so, the patrons. A tight grip was needed to keep snarling chaos—Bosch's imps of hell—at bay.

How different we are! We invite chaos. To slander or destroy our past is more nearly our aim. The past is too crushing, too omnipresent, too exhausting. We yearn for a dark, unknown, primitive time into which we can read what we believe we have lost.

> [I]f man cannot hope to be perfect in the future let him at least believe that he was perfect in the past. The transfigured vision of man's past is not less than the dream of man's future.
>
> —Arthur Cohen

The manifesto of the radical attack on the past is violent, sweeping. It always includes the burning of the museums as if there were no way to survive except through parricide. There seems to be no other way to proclaim the faith than by wiping out memory.

We analyze, we parse historical detail and trivia until we have broken down all distinctions—until we are left with a featureless plain. We arrive at a negative entropy in which all is permissible and nothing is important. Our critical system assigns all manifestations equal value. It offers us the solace of private imaginings of personal and collective glory. It offers equal time, but only to the members of our own faction.

A room of the living dead: Bruges

Between twelve-thirty and two the museum guards take lunch and only the nineteenth- and twentieth-century galleries remain open. I wander about disconsolately, impatient to get back to haunting the past. But suddenly I find myself in a room filled with late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Belgian haunters of the past—artists determined to emulate their forebears from the Gothic to the Baroque, from the Master of Alkmaar to Vermeer. This peculiarly Flemish academy reflects little, if anything, of what we think of as major currents in nineteenth- and twentieth-century art.

Lybaert painted a "Ter Borch" lady standing at a table wearing a long satin dress of pale blue. The room, like her dress, is a seventeenth-century "costume" with only a small object here or there to tell an acute observer that it might belong to the nineteenth century. He also painted a "Memlinc" *Madonna Enthroned* which has about it a faintly Pre-Raphaelite aura, like the delicate scent of expensive soap.

Several paintings by Edmond Hove, including a *Portrait of Karel Recour,* a *Portrait of Galileo* with appropriate historical references, and a *Zelf-Portret,* have the precision of early Flemish works. Jan van Eyck's head of the Canon van der Paele suggests itself as their ancestor. The *Zelf-Portret,* with its curiously pale and hypnotic shimmer, now faces us fully, and the light too has moved from the side to the front. The historical data are weird, disorienting. There are some surprisingly good paintings here. They have a mood and intensity that is more than one might anticipate from the living dead. I feel an anxious puzzlement.

In a rich, Vermeer-like interior setting—no, closer to de Witte, perhaps—a painter named Braekeleer placed an old, shrunken peasant in a wide-brimmed straw hat, a dusty coat, and baggy trousers. He is seated stiffly in an armchair, his feet on a step stool. His hands are folded on the crook of a cane which reaches to the floor between his feet. He faces us directly, set against an elaborate gold brocaded wall. We look now into the room frontally so that the incongruity of this figure, in so unlikely a setting, becomes a confrontational shock. It is a strange, eccentric painting. Is the peasant in this elegant room a social commentary? A social protest?

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Yes. Both, I think. I don't know what to do with all this other than to shrug and move on.

Alternative life styles: in the marketplace

There are rooms in the museums of Bruges, Leiden, Haarlem, Rotterdam, Antwerp, filled with glitzy group portraits of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They are crammed with hard-sell rhetorical flourishes and with gaudy, vulgar colors. They flash with medallions and ceremonial sashes of satin, puffs of lace, the glint of embellished sword sheaths and gilt handles. Beringed fingers glitter at us from their position on turned hips. These paintings are bristling and aggressive. They are noisy artifacts, as lively and dissonant as the marketplace minds of those that made them and those that bought them.

Where do Jan van Eyck's jeweled crowns, gold-threaded hems, heavy brocades, silver basins, and polished brass chandeliers sit in relation to glitz and hard sell? Are they not the burgher trappings of wealth, status, and possession? The kind of trappings that Savonarola had the Florentines burn in piles on the streets? Why is one vulgar and the other not? What is true craft and what is glitzcraft? Is Jan the hard sell of God? Or is Rubens, because he never did believe in God in the first place? Answer!

How much stands between ourselves and that past! Among other things, "modernity" has meant analysis. It has meant the isolation of a particular formal element uncontaminated by any syntactical debris. We have attempted to give to the isolated factor the value and significance of an entire world. The effort is soberly called "research." Its goal is no less than the liberation of pure expression. Freedom. Perhaps even revelation. The "pure" condition of music is its dream.

Our desperate effort to create a whole out of a part comes from the recognition that we can produce only fragments. If we cannot have the whole, let us at least exalt the purity of the part. Let us seek out essence. It is our religious quest clothed in the language of science and of faith. We have been buttressing our "research" with theories—so much so that the throries have become more interesting than the fragments. Among the Flemish, theory—no matter how complex—never outstripped the work of art itself. I do not want to imagine how I would "see" a Mondrian on the wall next to a Vermeer without the intervention of Mondrian's theory and all that others have written about it. Or a Barnett Newman next to a small Jan van Eyck. Or next to Rubens's vast *Baptism of Christ*. Conceptual art marks the furthest reach of theory outstripping art itself. Was conceptual art really a formal declaration of bankruptcy? Along with our theories we offer clear historical imperatives and categories of saints and sinners, those who are "with it" and those who are "out of it." Alchemy, astrology, numerology, and politics are as "with it" as computers, lasers, television, blips and beeps, and the precise logic of the color sphere.

In some deep subconscious way we are as apocalyptic as the fundamentalists we deride. We have a messianic streak and would rid painting, by burning if necessary, of all taint and corruption. We are ready to hasten the new era by the deliberate commission of every stylistic sin so that the corrupt structure will topple of its own accord.

Since Abstract Expressionism we have continued to glorify process made visible. Here is a *Calvary* by Dirk Bouts—a rarity because it was done on canvas rather than wood. The tempera did not survive well on the soft give of the canvas, and the surfaces have so deteriorated that we see clearly all the layers of the technique down to the very canvas itself. It looks quite beautiful to me. It has a particular appeal to our modern temper because the layers of facture stand revealed, the processes made visible. The cracking and peeling, the attrition of time, give to our romantic eyes the satisfying history of forming and deforming. The visible process is as personal as a confessional. I savor the revery provoked by the ruined fragment.

In the activity of its decayed surface the hermetic seal of Bouts's craft has been de-

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stroyed. I see his still fixity transformed into a flickering open tracery, almost like an Impressionist play of light and air. Or at moments, conversely, it looks like a battle scene by Marca-Relli. It has lost its historical moorings. It belongs nowhere. Shall we put it in the room of the living dead?

Do we like Bouts's *Calvary* because our modern condition is so atomistic that we empathize with the fragmented work as though it were ourselves? Does it correspond to our sense of loss, our damped hopes for change and renewal? Or is it our forlorn wish that from the flux of that destroyed field renewal will spring?

Today, exposure of the soul's torments is everywhere in demand. Openness and honesty, purity and naturalness are the siren songs of the marketplace. We are obliged to share, expected to confess. Slickness is sickness. Finish is ugly concealment. Secretly we know it is impossible to walk about without skin or disguises and that such language is itself manipulative and hypocritical. We are so far from the fifteenth century.

How shall we join the flux of history? How shall we keep its flow alive, defended against the malevolent occurrences in the room of the living dead? Shall we update Teniers's *Smokers* by having them switch to pot and putting them in a Soho bar? Is Marilyn Monroe our Mary Magdalen?

The museum haunts me with its promise of revealed truth. I am convinced that the answer waits just round the corner in the next room. I can even see the answer glowing just beyond the frame of the doorway. When I turn the corner it has, of course, gone. I expect to see graffiti on the wall: "Look with care! Retrospect shall make you free!" How many times today have I been forced to mutter despairingly, "Oh, they did it! And they did it first. And they did it better!"

Leiden: in praise of silence

Svetlana Alpers's book on Dutch painting, *The Art of Describing,* has been my intriguing companion on the Dutch half of my travels. Spurred by my readings, I looked with some care today at David Bailly's *Still Life.* Alpers celebrates Bailly, seeing in his work a persuasive demonstration of the value of the word "describing" in thinking about the attitudes of the northern painters. However exemplary Bailly's work might be for confirming some of Alpers's generalizations about northern painting, I did not find the painting very prepossessing.

Bailly's self-portrait gazes out at us. He gestures with his mahlstick, "displaying" the words and objects on the table as a catalogue of metaphysical arguments . . . a symbolic discourse. It is complex in its compositional gambits. It has to be "read" with care and there is, quantitatively, much to ponder.

I am more strongly drawn to Snyders's *Viswimkel.* In this painting the fish vendor gazes directly at us as he replenishes his stock by emptying a basin of fish into his stand. His gesture "displays" for our benefit and delectation the full compendium of the life of the sea. Bristling, squirming, intestinal, with such energy and gusto, with such a sense of the gross, repellent, slimy, clawed, spiked, finned, furred, and toothed gleaming, that it is as much a relished catalogue of sins as it is of the amazing variety of marine life. It is a burgeoning, spilling-over bounty of gustatory pleasure to come, and disgust. I can almost smell it, its inner demonic taint. And death too. It also invites reading and naming. Even though Snyders may not be Rubens, how much richer his work is than Bailly's, and, finally, in the directness of its statement, how much simpler! His work has that quality of knowing recognition that goes beyond describing.

Like Bailly, Snyders gazes at us. Like Bailly, he displays his wares—a kind of encyclopedia. But did he also, like Bailly, arrive at whatever measure of success through describing? I think not. To me it appears that Snyders envisioned first the grand amalgam of his sensations, whose parts, in like spirit, he then articulated—whereas Bailly presented "ideas" in illustrative support of the dictates of a thesis. Bailly's work is basically atomistic, for all that its objects are so skill-

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fully ordered in the space by a complex geometry. Yet I wonder: am I merely exposing my bias against an artist who is intellectual and classicizing? Am I exhibiting a "modern" orthodoxy of preference for a painter who has a streak of expressionism in his work that could lead to a still life by Ensor?

Bailly's painting is pompous and moralizing. It lectures at us, masses its proofs, and editorializes in slick and polished prose. His righteous hand meticulously fulfills its duty. It is cold, academic, hard. The containing geometry notwithstanding, it is noisy. Snyders's painting, on the other hand, is not noisy so much as it is busy. And that busyness is unified by a sustained range of color and tone, and by the dominance of a single, sensate idea.

Alpers herself is only too anxious to point out that generalizations always suffer from major exceptions: Rembrandt, Vermeer. But generalizations occasioned by a useful but limited theory also suffer from exceptions like the Snyders. Why does it so often seem that it is only the mediocre, the "also-ran," the "school of" that conform to all the canonic requirements? They make so clear a case, or are so transparent, that they have no residue of mystery. They are therefore "exemplary" like the paintings selected by the curators of our museums for periodic documentation of the going things.

It is my license if not my privilege as a painter to make such judgments. Unlike most historians of art, I find it impossible to repress those qualities of response which come, on the one hand, from my own anxieties and the narrow needs of my studio, and, on the other, from that which age has not yet quelled: ambition, ego, force. Lust makes me embattled and ungenerous. Wisdom and tolerance are for me hard won, and are often only masks insecurely worn. In my case, to mimic the historian's calm, dispassionate refusal to make certain judgments and invidious comparisons is simply dishonest.

Of course I know what distinguishes the great from the "also-ran": all the complexities of theme, form, structure, light, color, air, space, have, at the center, a fixed point of light surrounded by silence. The grandiloquent paintings by Rubens in the Antwerp museum shimmer, vibrate, and are, finally, majestically still. There is nothing in the resolution to diminish the shock of recognition that I perceive as light.

I am speaking of that kind of "knowing" or "recognition" to which, in its defiance of language, we assign, *faute de mieux,* a word like mystery. Mystery intrigues us; its clues lead and tease us. If we cannot resolve a mystery, we are irritated. If it blunts the probes of reason and intuition, we weary of it. Sometimes we assign another word: ambiguity. In most areas of experience we plead for answers to mysteries and demand that ambiguity clean up its act. With a work of art, however, we embrace mystery, glorify ambiguity (sometimes even use it to cover up for failure) and the shiver it affords us. Why?

> The pathos that all works of art reeks of comes from their historicity. From the way they are overtaken by physical decay and stylistic obsolescence. And from whatever is mysterious, partly (and forever) veiled about them . . . .
>
> —Susan Sontag

> Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces belabored by time, certain twilights and certain places try to tell us something, or have said something we should have not missed, or are about to say something; this imminence of a revelation which does not occur is, perhaps, the aesthetic phenomenon.
>
> —Jorge Luis Borges

For Borges and Sontag the issue is the veiled, the hidden, the lost—the aesthetic experience as a kind of mourning for that which we have lost "forever": revelation. It requires an ardent believer like T. S. Eliot to say: "The end of art is the ecstasy awakened by the presence before an ever-changing mind of what is permanent in the world, or by the arousing of that mind itself into the very delicate and fastidious mood habitual with it when it is seeking those permanent and recurring things."

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The condition of "permanent and recurring things" is silence, revelation, and ecstasy. The best and most exalted ambitions of Flemish and Dutch painting is the attainment of revelation, the offering of silent ecstasy. I have experienced both.

23 December: Brussels, the fifteenth century

I began, as we tend to do, well back from an altarpiece, to take in the whole. I swept by like Halley's comet. Distant. Aloof. I was also impatient, waiting to be grabbed, confronted, held. There were so many spiky altarpieces glistening darkly along the walls. The scale insisted that I come closer. The complexities told me that gestalt, like love, was not enough. Reluctantly, I began a kind of museum dance. I moved in a little. Stopped. Put my glasses on. Moved back a little. Stopped, and took my glasses off again. I felt a gnawing sense of obligation. Having come so far! Across an ocean!

I was, after all, interested in the making of these works. I darted in to scan a quick detail. Once in, there seemed always to be something else demanding attention. It became work. I had shifted from passive to active, back and forth, stop and start. Finally, I overcame my embarrassment and took out the magnifying glass from my camera case. I felt like a caricature by Daumier, a pompous, pretentious "connoisseur"! The guards eyed me distrustfully.

I pored over the surfaces, watching shifts of tone, reading this small event and that one. I looked at a tiny figure hanging a carpet out of the window of a tiny house, at the people gathered before the church, at the boats moored along the quay at the river's edge. I moved to the wings, left and right. I spent a full thirty minutes with that altarpiece —long enough to have listened to a symphony by Mozart. A temporal art? Reading?

I understand now that these paintings were intended to be seen with a slow, parsing scrutiny. They demand a "reading" and a meditation from near and far. The rapid gratification produced by the sweeping gestalt eliminates the pleasures to be found in finish, detail, and iconography. We are deprived by our impatience. If the work is large we must move our bodies to see it. This kind of looking has its roots, perhaps, in the tradition of manuscript illumination. It is intimate, close, seductive, meditative, and as I turn the pages of a book, I may turn the wings of a small retable. Looking, I shut out the world. I am intended to come close. The small mirror on the wall in the Arnolfini wedding portrait was not put there for historians of art, nor was the reflection of the artist in the armor of St. George in the *Canon van der Paele Madonna*. Rather, they are for me, the viewer. In that searching scrutiny I am reconstructing the process of the work's creation—the positions of the artist, his visualizing and his making.

I find that in my intimate search of the painting my pace of entry into the space changes and also that the time given to contemplation varies. I stop at moments of particular interest of theme or facture, of levels of symbolism, of central themes and supporting commentaries. Is there a kind of rhythm to this "seeing," then? It is a guided tour of significant events, a tour of experiences and scriptural recognitions both large and small. Is this not a temporal art? I am also called upon to witness and affirm all that I see. I am, in parsing close, in the landscape, "in" the room. I worship with the Canon van der Paele. I admire with him. I taste, smell, touch, weigh, ponder, possess. Like him, I am awed.

27 December: the sacral hush

In the solemn and sacred stillness that pervades the paintings of the Flemish masters, awe is the dominant sensation. It overrides any lesser personal emotion—even pain, which is, after all, transitory. All religious events partake of the iconic, the hierarchical, and the transcendental. They have, therefore, a correspondingly appropriate immobility. Time stops. The moment is eternal.

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Petrus Christus's *Pietà* in the Brussels Museum haunts me with its surreal, dreamlike quality. The elegiac rhythms of the softly rounded, descending hills; the stately grandeur contained in the mournful curves and gestures of each figure; the supernatural clarity of the radiant light upon the "realness" of things: these create a unity that is trancelike and magical. The *Pietà* is lyrical and flowing and, at the same moment, still.

The painted image repeats an event which happens not once in the past but is always happening. With the creation of every new image the event re-occurs. The sacred nature of the event is reinforced by reiteration. Repetition is a fixed canon in the continuity of religious belief. Even today, kitschy slogans on church fliers, automobile bumper stickers, evangelical tracts stuffed in the mailbox, assure us that Christ continuously suffers for us the torments of the cross, that the Messiah is always imminent and on the way, and that evil too is continuous.

The visible stirring of emotion as it is dictated by the text—the figures of the lamentation, the anguish of those witnessing the crucifixion—may be registered by the bending, sagging curves of swooning figures, the wringing of hands, the moaning open mouths, the meticulous tears coursing down the pallid cheeks. All of these descriptive and kinesthetic signs of grief and agony are opposed by the reticent simplicity of hands joined in prayer. The joined hands manifest the sacred hush, the awe, and supplication.

Repetition reinforces belief. It intensifies meaning, insures salvation. All religions posit a belief in the efficacy of repetition. How many candles are lit? How many acts of contrition performed? How many times does the ad appear on television? How many prayers uttered? We are, after all, children. We are the children of God. We are the children of God's emissary. We are the children of Bourguiba. We are the children of Papa Stalin. We are the children of Eva Perón and Indira Gandhi. Perhaps also of General Motors and Exxon, of Ma Bell and Toyota.

The sacred event, which is a form of ritual reoccurrence, sanctifies the ground on which it takes place. We respond, as does Jan Arnolfini in his wedding portrait, by removing our shoes. We maintain that solemn, impassive silence that is the measure of our awe. Those beholding a sacred event are mute. The scene is like a mimed rehearsal. It is part of a continuous performance. Slow. Stately. For these reasons the Flemish painters were rarely concerned with radical movement in their figures.

The artist, in creating the image, causes the event to "happen" again. The painting's sacred "reality" must be perfect in its surface and its details. It must not be betrayed by the artist's hand revealing his own emotionally idiosyncratic responses.

As the magical power of words constitutes a reality, so too, does the magic of the image. That the painting may be felt to be not merely symbolic, but also real, is the aspect of image-making that once so distressed the church fathers. How many devils were scratched out of existence on how many altarpieces by how many fervent believers in how many chapels? The painting is willed by God through the medium of the painter and is a form of revelation.

No longer inclined to accord this power to paintings, we now find it in film and television. The "scientific" verisimilitude of the medium persuades us along with its techniques for seamlessly combining document and fabrication. In the past as in the present, whether or not everyone believed, whether or not some few may have looked with jaundiced eyes upon such matters, the condition of belief obtained rather more than less. The condition was there to be used by artist, or prelate, as need dictated.

It will not do to say, "Well, but we no longer believe, and certainly not in that way. The past has a quaintness, yes, and perhaps some charm. But we cannot be expected to be honestly moved by, or even to be interested in, the faraway, outmoded and primitive quality of belief that resides in these paintings. We can filter the paintings through our training and admire them for their craft,

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perhaps, or, more likely, for their formal values. Although we might be intrigued by their intricate literature and symbolisms, our needs are different and so too are our demands upon art. Can we become fifteenth-century Flemings?"

Yes. We can. I feel how Rogier painted that Mary Magdalen. I feel that she was laved with paint, caressed, stroked, burnished into the glowing existence of his belief. I feel the artist's will pouring into her. He knows her, creates her, has her, is her. And I recognize her in myself.

The compelling energy which we call spiritual is as much with us as ever. We continue to be concerned with the problem of evil and the dream of human perfectability. We search endlessly for the assuagement of suffering and a tenable rationale for an unjust and capricious fate. We attempt through reason and other forms of magic to control or appease demonic and destructive forces. The specter of death without meaning pursues us always. And against that meaningless death stands our yearning for immortality.

I am not speaking here of the dispassionate, orderly search of a philosophical inquiry, but rather of the more primitive, impassioned demands that theology seeks to satisfy. To live, we cannot confront chaos for long. Without a God to whom we might consecrate our art, we turn to science to control the mysteries of the universe. We produce a scientific art: pure light and color theory, kinetics and engineering, high-tech electronic art. Or we consecrate art to the "people" as divinity. We produce for the state a utilitarian and didactic art—as once we did for the church. Or, in the name of freedom, we consecrate art to art, and place our spiritual energy and our faith in art itself. And in our spare time we contemplate the nature of the price to be paid for each of these options.

What remains as a continuity is the mystique and morality that so many of us attach to art—whether our language is scientific, spiritual, or philosophical. Our spiritual energy is remarkably adaptable. With the failure of each God, we regroup. We claim that our present passion is in no way like the old, discredited system of belief. The present passion is always superior because it is rational, or scientific, or more compassionate. It is comforting to think that science will prove our rightness—or leftness, as the case may be.

We know in our bones that there are no final answers to these problems. We know that there are only provisional systems disguised as answers. We know that the seeming efficacy of any system depends upon a sufficiency of passionate agreement so that we may accept the sad terms of existence. The energy itself remains the same because the essential problems remain the same—as much for us as for the fifteenth-century Flemings. Only our arrogant conceit or our hopelessness keeps us from admitting that we understand the Flemings very well indeed.

8 January: St. Pieterskerk in Leuven

I remember, as a student in the early Fifties, poring over a reproduction of Dirk Bouts's *Martyrdom of St. Erasmus of Antioch.* I remember its lack of visible affect, and how deeply that disturbed me. The protracted torture of the saint, his entrails wound onto a turning spit, is horrible. But everyone in this painting, including the victim, remains impassive, stone-faced. I believed that the quintessence of sado-masochism had been reached in this painting.

In the Fifties we tended to look upon willing martyrs with almost as much dismay as we felt when looking upon torturers and executioners. It was the time of Bruno Bettelheim and Hannah Arendt, of Sartre and Genet. Graham Greene did not stand too high on anyone's list of notables, as I recall. It was not easy then, and it is not much easier now, to think of such an embrace of suffering as something other than illness. It is a tenet of our current morality that we condemn self-destruction. We will not consider masochism exalting. Nor will we

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accord to it the status of noble martyrdom. (Shall we try to convince an ecstatic Shiite of this viewpoint?) We look askance upon the excesses of medieval guilt, relegating it to an ignorant past which is beyond our comprehension. As though we do not have our own ample parallels! As though we cannot understand Savonarola or Botticelli's late *Lamentation* in the Brussels Museum. And Bosch.

Dirk Bouts's painting prefigures the torments and passivity of so many of those who were, in our own time, led to the ovens . . . those who have been attacked and rebuked by the survivalists. We are told to go down fighting. But to go down fighting is perhaps only another form of martyrdom, even though it is preferable. We can avoid these choices most effectively by slaughtering others. The true survivor does not go down either with or without a fight, but finds a way to escape—finds a place in which to copulate and to continue existing. The survivor does this by having no commitments. No involvements. No allegiances.

28 December: Brussels, the Museum of Ancient Art

Behind the rounded hill in Rogier van der Weyden's *Pietà,* a roseate sky rises to a clear, strong blue. There is a moving and lyrical tenderness in the near chiaroscuro and sfumatura that bathes the Mary Magdalen. She has a surprising presence, an intense existence. Laurent Froment, in Rogier's portrait of him, also has an absolute physical presence. From close up, the hand and the sleeve have an extraordinary tactility. There he is! There is, in both of these paintings, an unshakeable belief in the physicality of being. It is a credo, an abiding article of faith.

The Flemish masters dreamt of absolute existence as a manifestation of the creative will of God, the fact and proof of his creation. Theirs was a secure belief in the sacredness of all substances, ethers, things, creatures, elements, and their place and function within an ordered universe. All nature is indeed the language of God.

Painting is therefore a celebration and glorification of that universe and of that view of the world. The painter, in denying his "hand" by making it invisible, is reproducing God's creation. Faithfully. He attempts to parallel the process itself so as to arrive as nearly as possible at the perfection of God's work. What the painting depicts was made by God and not by man.

Looking at the *Pietà,* I behold a world the least part of which is a miracle. Awe before the marvelous informs these works. The massive, sculptural figures of the Master of Flemalle have a mystical urgency and a kind of propulsive energy from within; they also have a powerful tactile presence. In the work of Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden that presence is reinforced by a condition of light and atmosphere, a climate which breathes the very enigma of existence.

The mystique of light pervades all the best Flemish and Dutch painting. It is perhaps so obvious that I am embarrassed to mention it yet once again. Yet I can see no way of discussing this art without defining and redefining the role of light in relation to whatever argument is being proposed. How does this bear upon Alpers's idea of "describing," which is, after all, a modest proposal?

Light is described. Is that the same as rendered? But light is also actively describing in these paintings. Light itself is an energy like the shaping fingers of God, making and revealing. It bathes, forms, probes. The light is poetry. Describing is, after all, an exercise in prose.

The weather on Patmos is just fine

A heavy snow is falling, Bruegheling everything. I've been waiting for such a snow to see the elegantly drooping and knotted traceries of my hosts' plum trees and the weeping cascade of that other nameless tree against white fields merging with white sky. But it does look like serious weather out-

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side, with thick, wobbling, half-dollar flakes on the invisible horizon, and the sky an impenetrable wall. The houses at the far edge of the field have entirely disappeared and my hosts, who have just returned from a shopping trip, report the temperature dropping. Even the main roads are iced over. Bad. No museum today.

It is curious that the grand and meticulous embrace of God's creation by the Flemish painters did not extend to variable weather conditions and extremes of climate until the sixteenth century. A night scene or two, yes. And the series of seasons by the Limbourg brothers. The neon red brimstone of a hell panel as against the soft delicate blue of a benign paradise in the opposite panel. Yes.

We may see a haze at the horizon but otherwise the weather is perfect, with light, fleecy clouds here and there. The sun and the sun's rays are an almost stylized nimbus of the kind populated not by birds but by angels. The weather for the Flemish masters is not neutral, but a positive attribute of the ideal. Winter's grimness, hardships, and vagaries, which the Flemish knew only too well, are excluded.

Is it the weather of Jerusalem? It is certainly not Flemish weather! Wet, grey, dour, and mournful. But it is the weather dreamed of and glimpsed only fitfully during the brief respite of the year. Yet the places are Flemish —the landscapes and foliage, the cities and houses, the people in the streets. Antwerp and Gent live symbolically in the reaches of the landscape as the new Jerusalem.

When Saint John sits upon his hill on Patmos, writing, where is he really? A Patmos located in the Flanders of the eye, or a Flanders located in the Patmos of the mind? We know that Jan van Eyck's altarpiece in Gent and his *Canon van der Paele Madonna* are visionary proposals filled with symbolic references to other places, other times. The Virgin is enthroned in a Flemish Gothic Church, a palatial interior, and a walled-in Flemish rose garden—in Heaven really.

The Virgin has reappeared again in Jan's and the Canon's day and reappeared again in the days of Jodocus Vyd, in the days of Robert Campin and Rogier van der Weyden. She recurs eternally and eternity is silent and slow to move. Movement within its stream is dreamlike, as is the still earth far below our jetliner. From up above we see all things at once. Truly. And did they not imagine God looking down from above and seeing all things at once?

And so where is Saint John? Where is the hill on Patmos? Where, indeed, if not in two or three places at once: a physical, real place that we know; a spiritual, symbolic place; and a third which is a textual, iconographical imagining. Tomorrow, when I look again at Saint John in Bouts's painting, will he not also be somewhere in the New York jungle of my mind?

A sfumatura of emotion

In his *Pietà,* Rogier van der Weyden intensifies the sorrow of the Mary Magdalen by deepening the mysterious atmosphere that surrounds her head—he creates, in effect, a sfumatura of feeling. I respond to the introspective tenderness of his touch, the softness of edges, the haze of tone, the blush of color—a softly pervasive redness, a warmth. It is as though Rogier was seduced by the Magdalen. A beautiful, fallen woman, reformed and redeemed, demands an especially sensuous and lavish treatment. She seems always to have inspired artists in a special way.

In Simone Martini's *Crucifixion,* the Mary Magdalen, with her golden hair rippling and cascading all the way down to her calves, kneels at the very point of the large vee of the composition. Passionately, she grasps with both arms the shaft of the cross; her face presses against its wood. She seems for the moment to be isolated along with Christ from all else within the painting. The child in the lower right points to her and she upstages even the swooning Madonna.

Emotion seeks physical release, and Rogier is quick to seize such an opportunity for expressive gestures. How poignant is the

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anguished drama of the Magdalen's pose in Rogier's Prado *Deposition* and in his retable of *The Seven Sacraments* in Antwerp. I see the structure of her body clearly beneath the garments, the tightly fitting bodice, the taut, sensuous muscularity of her neck, the veined tensions of her wringing hands. These are all vividly recorded observations. She is more Italianate than any figure I have yet seen. Almost like a Signorelli. She springs from the ground like a dancer.

I am struck by Rogier's compelling response to the very idea of the Mary Magdalen. The wringing of hands, the abandoned sobbing, the axial twisting of the body, the rhetoric of gestural drama, the intensification of tone—all of these are, in Mary's person, a new provocation for the figure in movement and the projection of intense feeling.

I have suggested that awe and the requisite sacred stillness are the limits within which the Flemish artists dealt with the problem of the figure in motion. Our criteria for that problem and others were set for us by the Italians. Whatever the degree of overlap between Flemish and Italian traditions, there are, as we know, many basic differences between the Gothic north and Mediterranean Italy. The key word here is "Gothic," and we are indebted to Alpers for the rejection of Italianate criteria in measuring the success or failure of Flemish and Dutch painting.

Gothic means, among other things, the figure draped rather than bared. It means, thanks to Kenneth Clark, that the undraped figure will tend to be "naked" rather than "nude." The Gothic will lead us to the compassionate Rembrandtian sorrowing over the pathos of the sweet but imperfect flesh. It means the influence of the late Gothic Sluter rather than the Italian sculptor/humanist Donatello.

When movement is required of it, the Gothic figure has two sources of energy, one from without, and the other from within. The flying angels of a crucifixion are "swept" into action as though by a sudden gust of wind. A spiritual spasm animates their robes; tightly knotted angular folds spring suddenly into long flowing curves. We remember this from the Romanesque, and sense the continuity even though these have now become massive, weighty folds and full, rounded forms. The bodies beneath the drapes are impelled into movement by the same divine energy, but the gestures of arms and hands, the turn and fall of heads with their weeping faces, come from the mourning within. We are yet far from the bereft, howling angels of Gruenewald. These angels are still contained within the limits of the sacred stasis. Only the violent descent of the fallen in a last judgment threatens to violate that stasis.

There is, however, another arena in Flemish painting in which the figure has an unexpected freedom of movement. I am thinking of the many grisaille renderings of "sculptures" set into the carved archivolts: "sculptures" on the columns or piers that frame the entry into the painting as though it were a chapel. There are also sculptured capitals of columned porticos, and "sculptured" figures crowning the ends of the armrests of thrones. These are all small figures and, more often than not, are based on Old Testament themes.

Over the heads of Adam and Eve in Jan's altarpiece in Gent are two lintels that support the stories of Cain and Abel. Above Eve's head, the murder, a prefiguration of the crucifixion, takes place, and Cain and Abel display a force and energy of movement never visible in any of Jan's major figures.

In Petrus Christus's *Nativity* in Bruges's Groeninge Museum, the painted "sculptures" of Cain and Abel are again remarkable for their intense and dramatic fluidity of movement. They are fitted into niches above the framing arched portal entry into the stable. The stone of the archway becomes, inside, the wood of the stable. The present moves into the past. It is a Gothic time machine.

The "sculptures" portrayed by the artist

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were "carved" by men. They are minor figures and they are small. As renderings of Old Testament themes they were to be read as prefigurations. They do not, therefore, have the iconic gravity of the "real" God-created personages who belong to the New Testament. As secondary embellishments of the central theme, the sculptures provide a running commentary, an exegetical text in which the artist embraces the challenge of the figure in motion.

7 January: in the Koninklijk Museum in Antwerpen

"It must be a van Eyck!" I thought, at first glance; but no, it is by the Bruges Master. I am astonished that such an ardent and accomplished work should be so like a van Eyck. I am surprised too that I do not think the less of it for that. The Bruges Master's identity simply seems to merge with Jan's in the flow of tradition. In the hierarchy of spiritual values, the Madonna, crowned, already elevated and glorified, looms large in the house and kingdom of God. Her scale is symbolic and visionary. She and her child become the church. Like the church, she is the container of the spirit of God. There is a vast, echoing space in this very small painting—twelve inches high, perhaps—and I am led by that luminous space to dwell upon the particular seductions of so small a scale and such refinement of craft in this and so many other Flemish paintings.

I am moved by the exquisiteness, almost painful, of Rogier van der Weyden's tiny *Annunciation,* of Jan van Eyck's drawing of *Saint Barbara* and his *Madonna of the Fountain,* no less small, and, of course, the Bruges Master's *Madonna and Child in a Church.* I think too of all those moments in Flemish paintings—in the deep recesses of the landscape, woods, fields, cities, markets filled with people—when I am invited within to savor the details of daily life and the intricacies of the least of God's creatures. Each of these paintings, so small in scale, contains a majesty: a grandeur of space, a monumental massing of forms, a lyrical and glowing color, or a surpassing luminosity. They are done with such a loving fineness of touch and so consummate a degree of craft!

I study the small panels by Simone Martini, the *Crucifixion* and the *Deposition,* with their massed figures locked into the gold ground. Newly cleaned and gleaming, they draw me physically in toward them. With my face but five inches from the panel, the light reflects so powerfully from the gold leaf and the color that my eyes feel irradiated. A feeling of marvelous recognition sweeps over me. So that's how it was! That is how it was meant to be seen and felt . . . a visionary and blinding moment! God will have spoken through it!

What do these paintings have when compared to the heroic scale of Michelangelo's ceiling? To the majestic Rubenses? The great Rembrandts? What is the effect of such incredible technique in such small works? Each painting is of such an intimacy, is so focused and concentrated, contains so intense a mystery, that it becomes prodigious within itself. Because of its size it acquires an uncanny density and weight of meaning. I long to hold the painting, to contain a whole world in my hand. Possession. To look at it, into it, is to close off all other awarenesses, all other relationships, to look at it as one looks at the beloved in an intense moment of feeling. The tiny scale is magical. It is as though a sorcerer has made the world in miniature and by that reduction has eliminated all coarseness.

In these minute dreams of perfection, size denies substance. They are surely spiritual objects, telescoping inwards, conflating, microcosmically surreal. They open out into a grandness in which I am encompassed. In these paintings I hold the world in my hand, marveling that they are larger than myself.

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Poems *by Charles Edward Eaton & Gibbons Ruark*

The lynx

We draw our lives after ourselves in streams—
The hurly-burly, the raw, rough, the long silken passage,
The lynx poised on the rock above, the bathing girl of our
high dreams.

Those creamy, creamy shoulders and the brilliant, piercing eyes,
The suntanned skin, the tawny fur, the tension of the leap—
Who told you beauty and the beast could never share the selfsame
paradise?

Do not think that these associations do not come and go—
The woman with her long, blood-red fingernails, lethal too,
The lynx, purring, pensive, turned albino, changed in the mind,
soft as snow.

The woman, rising in the rift, streams and streams with gold:
We keep on making up her myth, holding, holding, setting stasis
on the cat,
As if we would not run the risk, rupture that quietus, until
the story, manifold, is told.

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The lynx will keep his amber tone, her breasts are almond-white—
See how the mind goes back and forth with just two figures
to control:
Think how the dam will slack and overflow when we lie down at
night.

We stream and stream, push on, ahead, beyond—
I only tell you this because the lady with the blood-red nails
may one day dive
Where the spill has left the maw of all reflection yawning
in the pond.

—*Charles Edward Eaton*

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Larkin

This first-name-only business beggars history,
As if the young mistook Ben Jonson's need
To keep a certain name immaculate
Till darkness tugged his wrist in the graveyard road.

Nearsighted and too far off to wax familiar,
I would indulge the old formality
Of last names, since the man sank to his last hour
An ocean from my windows, low or high.

Larkin it is, then, with an added Philip
For those who would distinguish "English poet"
From, say, "Hero of the Dublin shipyards."
His road was a hero's byway, but he knew it.

Larkin I have been reading now since sunrise,
Or rather, with the day thus clouded over,
Morning. His trains on sidings, his racehorses
Nuzzling the dusk, his taking the measure

Of rainfall while we still look for a cloud,
His chosen solitude, a singular light
Dispensed by water in a lifted tumbler,
A real day's shouldered and delivered freight.

"This is not the full portion of whiskey,"
I muttered, young and tanked on Dylan Thomas,
But now his angle's undeniable.
Somebody, somewhere, is breaking a promise.

Surefooting through the rain of rice and horn-blare
Flattering some lovely daughter's wedding ride,
His tune is brassy, muted, grave, and just—
Jelly Roll's "Dead Man Blues" as the slow hearse glides.

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Or think of it this way, as L for Larkin
Enters its cold-water flat in England's
Alphabet: Just now I was leaning forward,
His closed *High Windows* thin between my hands,

Palm to bare palm were it not for the poetry.
Knock in a nail and hang that image somewhere
Out of the way. Call it, should you think of it,
A man contemplating applause or prayer.

—*Gibbons Ruark*

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Music

A dissent on Menotti

by Samuel Lipman

By most standards, a banner event in the history of American opera was scheduled to take place this past November. Everything seemed in place: a major work on the subject of one of the greatest painters of the Western tradition, written (libretto as well as music) by a composer rich in years and in innumerable popularly successful performances of his previous operas, presenting in the title role one of the most celebrated tenors of the last half century, conducted by a major European conductor and produced (under the composer's direction) by the distinguished opera company resident in our nation's capital, with the whole package to be broadcast (on a delayed basis) by PBS on network television.

Curiously, the result was called a disaster. Gian Carlo Menotti's *Goya* was premiered, in the year of the composer's seventy-fifth birthday, on November 15 (and broadcast on PBS on November 28) at the Kennedy Center Opera House in Washington, D.C., by the Washington Opera. The work—starring the great Placido Domingo in a brilliant and well-nigh unsurpassable performance of the title role, and featuring the distinguished conductor Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos in the pit—was largely condemned, when not ignored altogether, by major critical opinion and relegated to the garbage heap of operatic history. It is painful to quote from the journalistic barrage, but for the record two quotations will give the flavor of the onslaught:

> . . ."Goya," as soon became clear, had everything in its favor except a composer and a librettist capable of dealing in depth with its operatically promising subject. Mr. Menotti, functioning as usual in both capacities, has produced a rather stupefying exercise in banality, similar in its superficiality to his other recent works, though on a larger canvas . . . . This time Mr. Menotti has composed a parody of a Menotti opera.
>
> —Donal Henahan, in *The New York Times*

> . . . it's hard to imagine how such an experienced, if chronically uninspired, opera fabricator, libretto as well as music—the best of which are minor but viable achievements—could have signed his name to the sad exhibit that was unveiled November 15 at the Kennedy Center Opera House. How are the mediocre fallen!
>
> —Leighton Kerner, in *The Village Voice*

As negative as these verdicts are, they are in fact an accurate reflection of other reviews, and of private, not-for-publication, expert opinion as well.

And so a compositional career which began with the youthful 1937 *Amelia Goes to the Ball,* a work so successful on its initial performances in Philadelphia and New York that it was immediately picked up for production in the 1937-38 season by the Metropolitan Opera, now seems to have

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described that most tragic of artistic trajectories, the descent from initial triumph to final failure. Of little account now, or so educated opinion would have it, is an achievement that along the way produced the long-running Broadway successes of *The Medium* (1946), *The Telephone* (1947), and *The Consul* (1951); into the discard pile (at least for intellectual opinion) is thrown the NBC-commissioned television opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1950), perhaps the most performed operatic work written in the twentieth century. Even Menotti's current performance statistics seem of curiously little weight: the fact that (according to the most recent *Opera News* survey) in the 1985-86 season *The Medium, The Telephone,* and *Amahl* together racked up *798* performances in the United States alone is a datum good only for proving how much opera activity there is in the United States. It apparently does not serve to prove the staying power of Menotti.

I cannot say that in the past my own opinion of Menotti has been different from the prevailing critical rejection of him which seemed to set in during the 1960s, and which seems to have gained strength ever since. When *Menotti,* John Gruen's interesting biography of the composer, came out in 1978, I bought such records of Menotti's works as were then available—and in truth, except for his most popular operas, there is little to be purchased—only to find myself unwilling to accept as authentic a music which seemed so purposeful in its pursuit of an easily flowing vein of melody and in its rejection of all the developments in music of the last half century and more.

Nor was my opinion of the composer's works better when I experienced them in live performance. I found the extravagant and often hysterical *Juana La Loca* (1979), written as a vehicle for Beverly Sills's operatic farewell and produced first in San Diego and then at the New York City Opera, fragmented and unimpressive; the 1980 performance of the sardonic and distanced *The Hero* (1971) by the Juilliard American Opera Center struck me as trivial and jejune; the easy sentiment of *Amahl* has always been difficult for me to accept.

When I received a request at the beginning of November from the Voice of America to give an interview about Menotti, to be broadcast on a special program in connection with the *Goya* premiere in Washington, my initial reaction was to say that Menotti was a composer who had wasted whatever talent he had in an attempt to be popular, and that in the process he had been unable to go beyond rewriting Puccini for television. Fused with this moral judgment was an intellectual conviction that to turn one's back on the present, as Menotti surely had done, was to guarantee one's irrelevance. But even one's own cherished critical opinions ought not to be taken as holy writ. And so, before actually giving the interview, I returned once more to the recordings—augmented by some new acquisitions and by a tape of the City Opera broadcast of *La Loca*—of the music I had previously found so unconvincing.

This time around, I found ample evidence for a more positive view of Menotti, not just as a master of theater-*cum*-music, but as a musician and composer. Even a not very well played 1955 Leopold Stokowski recording of the Suite from the ballet *Sebastian* (1944)[1] now managed to convey the composer's great melodic power. The gripping original cast recording (made about the time of the work's 1947 Broadway run) of *The Medium*[2] made a persuasive case for the composer's ability to weld drama (in this case melodrama) with music so that the quintessentially nagging observation about twentieth-century opera did not arise: namely, that if the libretto is theatrically first-rate, the music is hardly needed, but if the libretto isn't independently distinguished, then the music somehow doesn't seem

1 This recording was originally released on RCA LM-1858, and re-released—but now deleted—on RCA ARL 1-2715.

2 This recording, with the inimitable Marie Powers in the title role, is fortunately still available on CBS Odyssey Y2-35239.

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strong enough to stand on its own. Sad to say, I found that the original cast recording of *The Telephone*[3] didn't change my original opinion of the arch and campy nature of the work. What was a surprise to me, however, was the tremendous lyrical power of Magda Sorel's great aria from *The Consul,* Menotti's 1949 protest against the bureaucratized police state. Heard in Patricia Neway's glorious performance from the original cast recording,[4] this excerpt—written to Menotti's lines, "To this we've come / that men withhold the world from men"—is in itself proof that newly written opera cast in traditional molds continues to have the power to move our emotions.

When I returned to the impressive 1955 recording of *The Saint of Bleecker Street* (1954),[5] I heard evidence of a growing musical solidity which was present throughout the work and not limited, as it had been, to climactic dramatic moments. The prevailing texture of musical writing seemed increasingly characterized by melodic as well as rhetorical power. The music, singing voices, and orchestra seemed to carry more weight, and the conversational patter (something for which Menotti was much admired in his first triumphs on Broadway) less. Only one important attribute of musical value (in my opinion) was still missing: the ability of musical phrases in themselves, not just in connection with the dramatic scenes they accompany, to stick in the listener's mind.

3 This recording, conducted by Emanuel Balaban (as was the original cast recording of *The Medium*), is currently available on CBS Odyssey Y2-35239, packaged with *The Medium.*

4 This excerpt, along with fascinating passages sung by other artists from works by Victor Herbert, Deems Taylor, Louis Gruenberg, Aaron Copland, and Howard Hanson, is available on New World Records NW241, under the title *Toward an American Opera 1911-1954.*

5 Excellently conducted by the late Thomas Schippers, Menotti's onetime protégé, this recording was first available on RCA LM-6032 and later on RCA CBM-2-2714. It is now no longer listed in the Schwann catalogue.

With this newly favorable opinion in mind, I listened to the tape of *La Loca,* made as it was at a time of Beverly Sills's decline as a singing artist. I immediately realized that much of my negative opinion of the work had been based upon an adverse judgment of Miss Sills's singing, a singing which for vocal spread and pitchless shrieks can have few parallels in recent New York operatic history. But a determined attempt on my part to isolate this admittedly basic element of the performance enabled me to recognize that Menotti's work was now marked by a new and powerful lyricism, complete with memorable melodic passages. One can only regret that a well-sung production of *La Loca* has not yet been mounted in New York to correct the performance-bound impression created by the 1979 City Opera version; that a new verdict on this much-maligned opera might be possible for the independent in spirit was suggested by a tantalizingly short excerpt from *La Loca,* hardly more than a few seconds long, which was shown, along with several other valuable film clips of Menotti's operas, on a recent ninety-minute PBS special devoted to the composer's career.

The television showing of *Goya* at the end of November impressed me not as the nadir of Menotti's compositional career, as the reviews would have it, but rather as its triumph. Here, in approximately one hundred minutes of music, was a complete world of rich emotion and gorgeous melody. Indeed, not since Puccini's *Turandot* has there been Italian operatic song of this density and uninterrupted flow. In *Goya,* Menotti has managed to strip from his creation every irrelevant, merely diverting element, and to concentrate upon the pure vein of music which he possesses.

Fortunately, Menotti decided to make an opera, not a historical treatise. The story is simple, and makes no pretense to historical accuracy. The five scenes of the opera, divided into three acts, show the painter in a tavern, meeting the beautiful Duchess of Alba who was disguised as a chambermaid,

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falling in love with her over again when he meets her in the splendor of her palace, spurning the advice of the King of Spain to throw her over, losing her to the Queen's poison plot, and then as an old man, blind and deaf, judging his past and finding that his life had been well spent for art. Along the way there are opportunities for Spanish dances in the tavern, pageantry in the royal palace, a mad scene as Goya realizes that he is going deaf, a ballet in which, now aged, he recollects the demons of his life, and the confrontation between the young Goya and what Menotti calls the painter's "deaf and blind carcass."

There will be no pedantic scholarship, of the kind now so fashionable in operatic criticism, expended on the libretto of *Goya*. The plot makes sense, not as history, but as a portrayal (in a musical setting) of the heights —and the depths—of an artist's life. At the very beginning of the Prelude to *Goya* we hear the great melody which throughout the opera most often represents the hero's love for the Duchess; again and again it returns, often in alternation with another theme, which seems to represent the Duchess herself and which is sounded to moving effect upon her death. Though these two themes are the cornerstones of the opera, the writing throughout is melodically distinguished and memorable, with great tenor and soprano arias as well as immensely attractive passages of dance music both popular (as in the tavern scene) and stately (as in the Act II entrance music for the Queen and for the Duchess of Alba).

The point of the opera, of course, is Goya's love, not just for the Duchess and for women, but for art. And so, fittingly, the greatest moments of the opera occur at the end as the specter of the Duchess appears to Goya as he is about to die. She sings, to the melody which has accompanied her progress through the opera, a hymn of forgiveness and blessing:

> I am the guilty one, I understood too late.
> Too late I prized your love,
> I filled your heart with pain.
> The silent cry of your raging brush,
> More than the soldier or the priest,
> will forever fight the fiend.
> Join the immortal company!
> Come, receive your crown, your glorious rest.

To these words Goya answers, in soaring melodic phrases:

> Oh Art! Oh Beauty!
> My only truth, my only love.
> Pity the artist's humanity,
> And lead him to God's perfection.

And then he dies.

Some words must be given to the transcendent performance of Placido Domingo in the title role. Ringing high notes, faultless legato production, what seemed to be immense stamina, believable acting (though some critics found it wooden) consistently beautiful vocal quality—all these, on this night, were his. It must be stressed that the role, written as it was at his suggestion, is grateful (for the right artist) beyond measure. If there is one factor alone which makes the opera difficult to produce, it is the need for a great tenor to sing Goya—a need all the greater because of Domingo's *tour de force* in the premiere.

Elsewhere the televised performance was of remarkably high quality. Victoria Vergara, as the Duchess of Alba, sang beautifully and touchingly; the other vocal roles, too, were well filled. The conducting of Frühbeck de Burgos was splendid, as was the playing of the orchestra. A particular commendation must be given to everyone involved for the excellence of the performance because of the usual lateness with which the composer finished his work. It seems that the week preceding the premiere found all the best New York music copyists in Washington, laboring around the clock to have the orchestra parts ready in time for opening night. I must say, too, that I found the television image of the sets and costumes consistently satisfying, and Menotti's direction edifying.

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It remains, I suppose, to explain just why so moving a work was so unsuccessful with educated opinion. Much of the reason lies with Menotti's ostentatiously rich melodic and harmonic vocabulary. It is not, of course, that one is not allowed to write in a pastiche of bygone compositional styles; Dominick Argento, to name just one example, has recently done so to the greatest success in his *Casanova,* given for the first time last season at the City Opera.[6] But it cannot be too strongly emphasized that Menotti is *not* a writer of pastiche, for pastiche connotes a distanced, and usually mocking, treatment of that which is copied.

Menotti, by contrast, possesses a deeply authentic style, a style continuous with Puccini and other masters of late Italian opera. For our writers on music, alas, everything can be forgiven in a composer save sincerity. Because Menotti so clearly loves the immediate past out of which he writes, he stands condemned in the court of critical opinion.

I suppose something of the violence of the rejection of *Goya* can be traced to the conventional nature of the sentiments the opera's admittedly conventional music enshrines. In a time of flaunted anti-conventionalism, Menotti's opera has a lot to answer for: an artist gaining his renown through attendance upon the aristocracy, a lover shamelessly indulging his pursuit of beautiful women, and a life justified—and highly valued—in terms of its production of great art. And yet, the fact remains that it is Menotti's sentiments which carry on the great tradition of operatic rhetoric: his musical exploitation of the dramatic conventions of love and art tie him firmly to a past in which opera was at once popular and refined, at once for the masses and for the *cognoscenti.*

To pay such a high tribute to Gian Carlo Menotti is hardly to say that his music, any more than his drama, is up-to-date. It is even less to say that Puccini is a viable model for others who wish to write serious music in general or opera in particular. It is still less to demand that the music of the present or of the future contain lush melodies and warmly appealing harmonies. To admire *Goya* highly does not mean that one cannot ardently wish to see works produced, whether by Schoenberg or Hindemith, Busoni or Milhaud, Sessions or Weisgall, that engage modern culture and society on its own terms.

To be capable of liking *Goya,* I trust, is not to be reactionary. It is simply to be able to listen with open ears to a beautiful piece of lyric theater. To reject *Goya,* as I suspect it is now being rejected, merely *because* it is beautiful at a time when musical art does not have the right to be beautiful is itself to be more than reactionary; it is to be obscurantist. Such obscurantism raises a fundamental question about music and its reception in our time: can any new music, or any possible new music, satisfy the demands our seasoned observers place upon it? The reception of *Goya* goes far to suggest a dismal answer to this most dismal question.

6 For my discussion of *Casanova* and its production at the City Opera, see *The New Criterion,* January, 1986.

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Art

High art from the desert

by Creighton Gilbert

Archeology is the national hobby of Israel, according to an often heard tag. It was intense in the area long before there was a state of Israel, of course. Among other things the Holy Land is mostly stony desert, and thus is a place where, as in nearby Egypt and Mesopotamia, objects last exceptionally long. So the scientific explorer can be as much drawn to the place as the pious one, and the successes of the scientist have an exceptional interest and importance for the pious. The pious person is likely to start behaving like an amateur archeologist, like a collector of arrowheads in America, and the rewards of professional successes ratchet up the fascination. Naturally the pious and the scientific person can be the same; the outstanding digger Nelson Glueck was also an American rabbi. In extreme cases it's a matter of proving by science the literal truth of the Bible. The Protestant Evangelical tradition, so easily linked to a liberal education about human history, has been a great related force. There is no better illustration of the obsession for getting at this mystically charged desert, and doing so with microscopic correctness, than *The Scapegoat,* the once-famous painting of the Pre-Raphaelite Holman Hunt. Actually sitting beside the Dead Sea with a shotgun, this high-minded Victorian painted the goat alone, condemned to death, an image of somewhat sentimental tragedy. There is nothing else but the sand, the stone, the Dead Sea, and other dead things. Their tight, dry correctness, and that of the goat's stringy hair, is the vehicle of the vehement commitment we are asked to share, where faith and fact insistently coincide.

Among the products of these drives is the archeological section of the Israel Museum, displaying the choicest results of such work. People who are involved in looking at objects of art in wide variety, and who like to do it with comfort and good lighting, are indebted to the range of motivations that has subsidized their inspections here. The galleries in Jerusalem extend on and on, comparable, say, to the classical section of the Louvre. One may well have assumed something like that in a general way, but until one arrives at the museum one is not actually prepared either for the quantity or the aesthetic splendor of what is shown, or for its uniqueness.

Archeological museums come in two sharply distinct types. One is the inventory of pot shards and flint stones that only professional specialists can love. The other is the presentation of the art of a high culture which happens to have been buried and dug up; this type is most obvious with respect to the other parts of the fertile crescent, Egypt and Mesopotamia, where civilization is usually said to have started. It can happen in certain other instances, with Chinese bronzes or Mimbres pottery, providing the viewer a sudden pleasure in sighting a truly different visual style, a fresh image for eyes familiar with all that the museum without walls pro-

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vides. The museum in Jerusalem provides this repeatedly. The elegant objects of high art are again and again of kinds not known elsewhere; one has to see them there.

One is glad to stipulate that all this material has come to us as a result of the very best work in archeological fact finding, even though this factor is hardly presented in most cases. The research has been done by people from many countries, but mainly of course by Israelis; the amount of activity has greatly picked up since the creation of the state. One might imagine that they have been driven not only by professional commitment, but once again by the requirement of validating the Bible, in this instance to add to the data showing that this land is the place of the Jews. That factor is certainly suggested powerfully in another part of the museum, the building called the Shrine of the Book. In it the Dead Sea Scrolls are given a setting that evokes a Holy of Holies with relics. But it is the exception. The objects in the archeological galleries are, in the majority, not related at all to the Bible or to Jews, and this fact is neither emphasized nor suppressed; it is likely to pass unregistered by most visitors.

At the beginning of the time frame, of course, that lack of connection would be expected. Following a short introduction which truly is archeological, with flints and bones, we come abruptly to a neolithic culture of about 10,000 B.C., called Natufian. From Jericho, which is often labeled the world's oldest city, there are sculptures of human heads from about 7000 B.C. made by modeling with plaster on actual skulls, a unique phenomenon famous enough to have got into Janson's *History of Art*. (The illustration there is the only one of a work of art in an Israeli museum.) The available information is much more complex when we pass to what is called the Canaanite period, which certainly has a Biblical tie, in that it was "the land of Canaan" to which the patriarchs travelled. The archeologists have found that people of this era produced complex cities; they are contemporary with the First Dynasty in Egypt. These cities had a tumultuous history, declining to villages at a time when Egypt was in turmoil too, then reviving, but under Egyptian colonial dominance. All that spanned two millennia, and brings us to the advent of Moses.

The sophistication of the products of all these peoples is most obviously brought to our attention in the museum in their variety of media. In archeological museums, one is used to finding that everything is pottery. But the Natufians were carvers in limestone and bone. Later, male and female nudes appear in ivory, and then astonishing works in copper and obsidian. The Canaanite finds include a silver cup and figures incised in gold sheets, as well as work in alabaster. This crude test induces us to adjust our sights upwards as to the level of civilization here, and after that it is less difficult to accept that the stone and pottery objects are also very sophisticated.

The chosen objects in this archeological museum frequently show vivid analogies to modern art forms, something that can always happen when extreme selectivity has been exercised by museum curators, but of course only in favorable original circumstances. A Natufian gazelle with its legs tightly tucked under its body readily evokes the stone sculpture of John Flanagan, the early twentieth-century American artist, in its attractive mix of plain globular stoniness with swelling overtones of warmth and tender life. What is not like Flanagan is the very smooth, not quite slick, surface of this simplified mass, as if Flanagan had been qualified by a "modernistic" commercial design of Raymond Loewy. Among the copper objects of the fourth millennium B.C., an "ibex scepter" is the most immediately striking in meeting museum-going taste halfway, as it were. The heads of five animals sprout out of a cylinder on two levels. Three heads face in the same direction, and two at the sides appear in matching profiles looking outward if we view the other three in full face. The one between the profiles is evidently a type of goat, with wonderful twining horns, and the four others are ibexes, whose horns curve more gently but still with unlikely

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elongation. Ibexes and goats live today in the same part of the Judean desert where this copper object was found. It was discovered in a cache with many other less elaborate ones, suggesting speculations about a cult. They remind us of the (much later) Luristan bronzes that were a collecting rage a generation ago. Thus it is quite reasonable for the museum's cataloguers to claim this as an original art of the area, without stylistic analogues. The visitor indeed sees a distinct high art, neither Babylonian nor Egyptian, so much so that occasional Egyptian-looking objects jump out. It keeps happening that visitors with some experience point them out to their friends.

Among the most splendid and startling objects produced by the Canaanites are two gold sheets, representing female nudes, long and narrow, circular in contour at the top but pointed at the bottom. Lines are engraved into them, producing the images; in one the dominating central motif is a smaller triangle presenting the genital area. Such a blend of references to sex, to geometry, and to refined wealth comes at us very directly. In this age some of the pottery objects also show the most understated kind of elegance in simple forms. The "snake jug" is totally plain except for its handle. That consists of two snakes whose bodies curve down and then rest lazily on the vase's shoulders with a topological sort of fluidity, recalling, say, the patterns that we see in an allegedly random string form by Arp.

It was this culture, in its weak late phase, that Joshua conquered at Jericho; we have arrived at the Bible, but we are halfway through the galleries. Immediately, we almost cease to get any comparable art. The Israelites were, of course, as we may now need to remind ourselves, the kind of rough tribe that overwhelms an old easygoing urban world in many contexts of world history, like the Mongols or the Visigoths. When we do see remarkable works of high culture at this date, they are, for example, those of the Philistines, who for a time shared the land with the Israelites. We know about them; they were the enemy who, in the person of Goliath, were beaten by David in his first step toward being king. If the works of art found on their sites indeed lack the great craft of the earlier peoples, they do have complex messages. It is an odd irony to recall that the modern term "Philistine," as it emerged among the romantic artists of the nineteenth century, has come to mean anti-artistic. At the same time as the ancient Philistines, the Canaanites in their last days still left complex creations. These are ivory objects with Egyptian style qualities in their line drawing, and come from Megiddo, one of the royal capitals of the Canaanite tribes. Megiddo is, of course, Armageddon, another name for the worst of evils which we have inherited from the enemies of the Canaanites. There are even elegant ivories from truly Israelite places, sharply cut openwork plaques, with suggestive likenesses to Phoenician as well as to Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures. But they are limited to a special context. They come from the capital of Israel, Samaria, and have connections with the reign or the policies of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, who was a Phoenician princess. It is still another name that has become immortal as a term of evil. There is really no other high art from the Israelite age, but that is not so negative as it may seem. It confirms what we also knew, that their creativity, greater than any of this, was in the word. Their masterpieces of text included, as a major form, grand denunciations, particularly those uttered by ascetic prophets passionate against mere dwellers in this world. We are not far from the great Protestant cultures that produced the English Bible and Milton, leaving the high visual arts to foreign courtiers like Van Dyck.

Rightly, the museum also exhibits words, more than any other I can recall. A remarkable gallery is wholly devoted to showing the evolution of Hebrew script forms, with diagrams and original fragments. The Shrine of the Book of course does this most of all. Among its proudest contents is the unique scroll of the commentary on the prophecies of Habakkuk, and the curators point out

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as among its most notable passages the comment on Habakkuk 2:15, which reads: "Woe to him who causes his neighbors to drink of the cup of his wrath, and makes them drunk to gaze on their shame." The incessant battle against the impure and the sensual is the source of its power.

In the later rooms of the archeological galleries, as the curators comment, "of the surviving objects, a high proportion are imports." These Persian and Roman monuments are provincial, and relate to cultures well known from finer works elsewhere. Here only specialists are likely to find particularly interesting displays.

The devoted archeologists who have found and studied this material have thus been free of nationalistic prejudices, presenting the situation as it was. Characteristically, in recent years, they have been Israelis who were immigrants from central Europe and heirs to the academic traditions and intellectual views of university people there, or the pupils of such immigrants. They naturally wished to make an art museum with the most rigorous standards of quality, thus recreating what had been good in their old homes in Budapest or Hamburg. The museum is meant to present marvelous works of art of all kinds, as they may be available, including for instance Dutch Old Master paintings. One effect of this is to detach the refined archeological exhibits from their specific contexts, making them a material for urbane aesthetic appreciation.

If this is the case in Jerusalem, it is infinitely more so in New York, at the loan exhibition of some one hundred and fifty selected objects, "Treasures of the Holy Land."[1] This is a show of the great treasures, including most of those that I have

1 "Treasures of the Holy Land: Ancient Art from the Israel Museum" is on view at the Metropolitan Museum until January 4, 1987. From there it travels to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (April 9 to July 5) and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (October 31 to January 17, 1988). The catalogue of the show is published by the Metropolitan Museum; 280 pages, $29.95.

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mentioned. These things are mostly tiny; the exhibition belongs to a very rare category in which the catalogue reproductions are in a high proportion of cases larger than the originals. On the one hand, this makes some of the modernistic effect easier to understand. The Loewy-like gazelle is less than three inches high; the larger of the two Canaanite gold women a bit over six. Certainly their status is due at first to the patient attention of scholars, but they are more readily interchangeable with objects of very different cultures than bigger things, inevitably more complicated. On the other hand, the small scale is no barrier in the show; the objects work beautifully as admirable forms to inspect. Yet the treasure-room effect is also strong. An Israeli visitor to the opening rightly said: "The museum is so full of treasures, here you see every little piece."

If there is an irrelevant reaction, it is in the American visitors. Many clearly are there as pilgrims who have found a surrogate for travel to the Holy Land. The museum's banner announcing treasures of the Holy Land is of dubious validity. Some objects appeal to a less-than-subtle taste for the modernistic. "I love the fish," said several independent viewers at one display case, singling out a bright pottery object hardly distinguishable from the goods in a beach-resort boutique. But then such simple responses are part of what happens when learned institutions urge the world to enter. What the objects say, and what their presenters have said through them, is not modified.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

"The Common Pursuit" in New York *by James Atlas*
The "Spiritual in Art" exhibition in Los Angeles *by Hilton Kramer*
Nabokov & his biographer *by Fernanda Eberstadt*
"The Aesthetic Movement" & American collectors *by Denys Sutton*
The memoirs of Chaim Grade *by Donna Rifkind*
David Perkins's "History of Modern Poetry" *by Bruce Bawer*
"The Age of Correggio" in Washington *by Creighton Gilbert*
German fiction since the war *by John Simon*
New poems *by Herbert Morris & Elizabeth Spires*

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Dance

Mark Morris Superstar

by Eva Resnikova

In his short career as a choreographer—he began creating dances for his own company in 1980—Mark Morris has produced a body of work prodigious in its volume and scope, and troubling in the elusiveness of its intentions. New Yorkers were offered a smorgasbord of Morrisiana this autumn during a month-long period that saw a "Great Performances" broadcast on PBS, the local premiere of a ballet commissioned by the Joffrey, the Batsheva Dance Company of Israel's performance of a piece originally created for his own company, and the Mark Morris Dance Group's mixed bill at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival.

The dozen works these programs comprised form a dizzying array that seems almost purposely devised to defy categorization. Yet several genres can be distinguished within Morris's oeuvre. There are the mimed vocal pieces (*Robe of White,* to a 1950s country-western ballad; *Love, You Have Won,* to a Vivaldi aria; *Jealousy,* to a Handel chorus; *Tamil Film Songs,* to an excerpt from an "unknown Indian film score"; *Dogtown,* to songs of Yoko Ono); the parodies (*Pièces en Concert,* to Couperin, which sends up baroque dance; *Canonic 3/4 Studies,* to a taped montage of clichéd ballet-class music, which does the same to classical ballet); the religious modern-dance opuses (*Gloria,* to Vivaldi, in the ecstatic mode of Doris Humphrey; *Stabat Mater,* to Pergolesi, in the long-woolen-underwear mode of Mary Wigman); the music visualizations (*Prelude,* to a harpsichord and violin miniature by the early avant-garde American composer Henry Cowell; *Marble Halls,* to J. S. Bach's familiar double-harpsichord concerto; *Esteemed Guests,* a classical ballet, danced on pointe, to a C. P. E. Bach cello concerto). Notably absent from this autumn's offerings were any examples of Morris's *épater les bourgeois* genre, which includes such works as *Striptease* and his drag solo *10 Suggestions.*

Morris's past is as eclectic as his present. Born in 1956 in Seattle, he began his dance training with flamenco, then added ballet lessons, and by age thirteen was performing with a Balkan folk-dance ensemble. After high school he journeyed to Madrid to continue his studies of Spanish dance but found the homophobia there intolerable. He returned to Seattle for more ballet lessons, and in 1976 he moved to New York. Following a stint with the Feld Ballet, he decided to concentrate on modern dance, and over the next few years he performed in the companies of Lar Lubovich, Laura Dean, Hannah Kahn, and, briefly, Twyla Tharp.

In 1980 Morris gathered together some dancers and gave his debut recital at the Cunningham studio in New York. The following year a reformulated group gave the first of what would be three annual seasons at Dance Theater Workshop. Morris now began attracting major attention in the press. In January 1984 he received the imprimatur of Arlene Croce of *The New*

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Yorker, the doyenne of dance critics, who devoted a thoughtful, somewhat guarded essay to Morris, declaring him a talented and serious choreographer. A year later, following Morris's sold-out performances at the 1984 Next Wave Festival, she pulled out all the stops, proclaiming him a "master" and "our guide to the future." It had already apparently become a bit much for the twenty-eight-year-old choreographer, who had retreated to his hometown of Seattle late in 1983.

Unlike most modern-dance choreographers, who prefer to think of themselves as prime movers, Morris is generous in acknowledging his artistic influences. These run the gamut from the early moderns (including, amusingly, those he couldn't possibly have seen) to the postmoderns, and he claims to revere Balanchine. His only harsh judgments are reserved for boring minimalists, self-absorbed performance artists, and recent Tharp, whose work he considers "mean-spirited." Morris just as freely admits to borrowing from whomever he admires. This unabashed raiding of dance history is generally taken as an indication of his assimilation of the past—the necessary prelude to his assuming responsibility for the dance of the future.

Much attention has focused on Morris's physical appearance. (Croce began her first *New Yorker* review with a description of his mop of brown ringlets, since shorn; another critic begins his interview in a recent issue of *Dance Magazine,* "Why did you cut off those beautiful curls?") Morris is unfailingly described as androgynous: a puzzling locution, since he does not exhibit any apparent female sexual characteristics—and we've seen all of him. He is, however, effeminate to a degree difficult to stomach even for a veteran dancegoer largely inured to this *déformation professionnelle.*

Just thirty, Morris has allowed his prettiness to deteriorate badly over the last few years. He was always unusually fleshy for a dancer, and now he has developed premature middle-age spread and an incipient double chin. Like the sacrifice of his curls, Morris's seeming lack of concern with physical perfection appears calculated to encourage viewers to focus on the edge of roughness he has always favored, both in his own dancing and in that of his company, who are similarly atypical physical specimens for dancers: a motley group of bottom-heavy, rather mature persons (some of his men are quite bald). Morris has said that he choreographs quickly and avoids over-rehearsing, preferring the amateur fervor of folk dancing to the professional polish of ballet.

Morris's strong points as a dancer are innate rather than learned: a fine rhythmic sense and the ability to vary the impetus of a phrase. But his greatest skill—also a gift—is as a mime. This is what allows him to zero in on the essence of a dance form he has not mastered (baroque, Indian, classical ballet) and come up with a simulacrum that is instantly recognizable, and obviously inauthentic—like a kinetic version of Sid Caesar's ability to give the impression that he is speaking French or Japanese.

It is all great fun and highly entertaining, but Morris's legerdemain is no more proof of his "assimilation" of these forms than Caesar's is. The moments of real dance interest in the predominantly mime pieces are rare and, when they do occur, largely ancillary. Morris's formal skills as a choreographer must be judged in the music visualizations and in the religious works, which are basically music visualizations with some programmatic content. In *Marble Halls* (a gratuitous title), Morris attempts a formal interpretation of Bach's double-harpsichord concerto in C minor in the manner of Balanchine, whose *Concerto Barocco,* set to the same composer's double-violin concerto in D minor, Morris inevitably evokes. The work ultimately fails: Morris's limited movement vocabulary cannot express the music's complexities, nor can his cultivated crudeness reflect its subtleties.

The most disturbing moment in the dance occurs just after the last strains of the exquisite second-movement adagio have died away, when one of the dancers suddenly falls

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Head 1920
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Image 4¼ X 4⅜ inches

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forward. Morris's use of slapstick here is evidently intended as irony: the visual equivalent of the currently fashionable wisecracking school of contemporary fiction epitomized by Lorrie Moore, whose characters communicate about their wrenchingly painful lives in one-liners in order to intimate depths of feeling so great as to be incapable of direct expression. It is also a shameful bit of coyness on Morris's part that serves to protect him from comparison with the creator of *Concerto Barocco.*

The deliberate restriction of Morris's language is partly an anti-elitist—read anti-ballet—bias that has a time-honored place in the history of modern dance. In Morris's case, though, the rejection of ballet has an added dimension: one of the reasons he turned to modern dance, he has said, was that he "got tired of pretending to be a straight guy in love with a ballerina." In his own works Morris treats men and women as if they were interchangeable. Since any language, verbal or visual, increases in eloquence according to its ability to make distinctions, Morris has sacrificed a powerful expressive resource in order to make a political statement.

When this distinction is forced upon him, however, as it is when he works with classically trained dancers, the effect appears to be salutary. In *Esteemed Guests* (another gratuitous title), to C. P. E. Bach's cello concerto in A major, Morris has succeeded in creating a truly original contemporary classical style. Its hallmark is a rigidity in the arms and torso that, astonishingly, brings to mind the calm center of Bournonville rather than bad ballet training. It is a rejection not of classical ballet but of a certain saccharine pseudo-lyricism typified by the works of resident Joffrey choreographer Gerald Arpino. (Morris actually makes the Joffrey dancers appear elegant.) This rigidity is carried to its ultimate expression in an extraordinary moment in the Largo, when the female corps dancers, supported in second position on pointe by their partners, fall slowly forward, until they are actually lying flat on their faces on the ground—an

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extreme image that Morris is able to render not only dignified but moving.

In *Esteemed Guests,* working with a received vocabulary that he makes his own, Morris is witty without being wisecracking, serious without being solemn. In his setting of Pergolesi's forty-minute *Stabat Mater,* he is not only solemn but sanctimonious. Here not a moment of levity or vulgarity is admitted. The movements are echt modern-dance angst, performed by dancers dressed in plain gray leotards and tights. There are three successive backdrops that progressively open up the stage space when they are raised. Each features a cross: the first is flame-red; the last, glowing white. It is the same image used to end *Robe of White,* the country-western mime piece, which recounts the story of a mother receiving the news, via registered letter, that her son has died in battle.

The sincerity of Morris's spiritual beliefs is not our concern. One must, however, question the artistic intentions of a choreographer who stages pratfalls to Bach but treats a Fifties inspirational pop-music ballad with respect. Morris's attitude could be an affectation, in which case he would be guilty of camp. Or it could be genuine; but then serious questions must be raised concerning his much-vaunted musical sensitivity.

If Morris wears his heart on his sleeve (as Croce aptly puts it in her most recent assessment, in which Morris seems to have been quietly demoted from "guide to the future" to "choreographer of the year"), he wears his religiosity on his chest. An oversized silver cross adorned this part of Morris's anatomy when he came out to take his curtain call in Brooklyn following the premiere of *Stabat Mater.* He acknowledged the applause in his characteristic fashion, by placing the palms of his hands together and moving his outstretched arms up and down in front of him in a gesture of benediction simultaneously vaguely Eastern and Western, which he bestowed alternately on cheering audience and beaming dancers. One might have suspected oneself present at the Second Coming rather than just Mark Morris's second appearance at the Next Wave Festival.

Is it mere coincidence that Morris's elevation to major-choreographer status occurred just as George Balanchine became inactive and died? There seems almost an unwitting collusion between new young choreographer and bereft audience and critics. Balanchine's self-appointed apostles may have allowed despair to color their perceptions of a talented and promising, if still somewhat undisciplined and self-indulgent, aspirant, who is not, alas, the savior of the dance.

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Books

Edmund Wilson: the author at sixty

by James W. Tuttleton

I crossed paths with Edmund Wilson, literally it seems, in the summer of 1955 when, after a long bicycle ride through New England, I alit at last in Wellfleet, Massachusetts. It was the end of an inadequately trained-for excursion, for just at that place—*la plage des intellectuels*—both of my Achilles tendons simultaneously "locked": pedaling, even walking, was no longer possible. At that moment, too, the Provincetown fishing fleet was putting into the Wellfleet harbor to ride out the heavy weather of an unpredicted hurricane. I had to get indoors, then, and recline with a book before the big blow. The innkeeper, eyeing my bookbag, slyly remarked to me that my room would be the favorite of another literary man, Mr. Wilson himself. (Why he should ever have taken a room there, when he owned a house just down the road on Route 6, may be evident to anyone who has read those briskly recorded sexual exploits—in *The Twenties* (1975), *The Thirties* (1980), and *The Forties* (1983)—that have thrown a randy light on the famed old literatus.)

Wilson, however, was not in Wellfleet just then. I have discovered in *The Fifties,*[1] Leon Edel's latest installment of his diaries, that Wilson was on his way to Talcottville, New York, where he summered in the Old Stone House on the family's property. It's probably just as well that I never tried to see him about his new book, *The Scrolls from the Dead Sea,* which had just brought biblical history alive for me. For in those years Wilson was apt to respond to inquiries with his infamous impersonal postcard beginning "EDMUND WILSON REGRETS THAT IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR HIM TO . . ." followed by a long list of things to be checked that he would not do: write introductions, read amateur manuscripts, give speeches, autograph books, etc. One box read: "GIVE INTERVIEWS." Another: "SUPPLY OPINIONS ON LITERARY OR OTHER SUBJECTS." Doubtless he would have declined an audience with a callow undergraduate then absorbed in the Essene sect. But, just perhaps, he might have said, "Yes, come on over. Let's talk." (By all accounts, he was a great monologuist. In fact, he has to admonish himself in the diary: "Don't talk all the time. It is an error to suppose that other people can have nothing interesting to say.")

The publication of *The Fifties,* in any case, gives fresh occasion to review a distinctive phase in a versatile career that was pre-eminently a life in letters. To some of us who were young then, Wilson was a heroic figure in his grand avidity for books: it was told in my college circle that he regarded meals as a waste of time and never ate without a book in hand. Undeniably inelegant, but at nineteen we too had no time for proprieties. John Wain, who met him about this time

1 *The Fifties: From Notebooks and Diaries of the Period,* by Edmund Wilson; edited with an introduction by Leon Edel. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 663 pages, $25.

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in Talcottville, reports: "I took him a parcel of new books from England, and to see him rip the parcel open (like a P.O.W.!) and put the books out on his desk, he with so many decades of reading behind him, was to glimpse something of the passion that must have driven a Johnson, a Hazlitt, a Sainte-Beuve."

Here was the superlative man of the printed word who had fulfilled his brilliant Princeton promise with *I Thought of Daisy* (1929), *Axel's Castle* (1931), *The American Jitters* (1932), *Travels in Two Democracies* (1936), *The Triple Thinkers* (1938), *To the Finland Station* (1940), *The Wound and the Bow* (1941), *Memoirs of Hecate County* (1946), and *Europe Without Baedeker* (1947). He had written novels, stories, plays, reviews, and articles on a vast variety of subjects including politics, history, economics, minority cultures, theater, film, art—and Hebrew, classical, continental, English, and American literature. He had been a reporter for *The New Yorker* and an editor at the old *Vanity Fair* and *The New Republic,* and he knew everybody and had probably read everything, it seemed.

At the time I first became aware of him, at the beginning of the Fifties, Wilson of course had already begun to reassert an authority in American letters that had been rather tarnished in the Thirties and Forties. Partly his stock had dipped because of his complicated involvement in the left-wing politics of the period. Like many intellectuals of the Twenties generation, he had succumbed to the Marxist view that the Depression heralded the collapse of capitalism. He hated big business and his own middle-class origins, and called in 1932 for the election of the Communist Party presidential candidate. Throughout the Thirties he urged American liberals to take over the Communist Party from the Stalinists and Americanize it along Marxist-democratic lines. This position alienated the radical left, not to speak of the center and right. Further, when World War II broke out, he became a wild isolationist, even arguing, after the war, preposterously, that although Jews had had adequate reason for fighting Hitler, they shouldn't have supported the war since "the extermination of six million Jews was already very far advanced by the time the United States took action."

But there was another reason why his critical stock had sunk, and it is related, I believe, to his increasingly untenable political position. Although he never succumbed to the crude view that literature ought to be the instrument of class revolution, his thinking was so politicized during this period that he overrated literary work that seemed most to reflect social conditions and that seemed best able to serve the creation of "the classless Marxist culture" for which he longed. He estranged, for example, a number of his readers by arguing—in "Is Verse a Dying Technique?"—that the novel had taken over the work of poetry and that "by Flaubert's time the Dantes write their visions as prose fiction instead of as narratives in verse." His capacity as a critic of poetry had always been in question, but Wilson went so far as to commit the fatuity that

> the old iambic pentameters have no longer any relation whatever to the tempo and language of our lives. You can't write about contemporary events in an idiom which was already growing trite in Tennyson's and Arnold's time . . . .

The poet Delmore Schwartz, for one, leaped upon this bizarre notion in "The Criticism of Edmund Wilson" (1942), and dismissed him as essentially a popularizer for the uninformed reader, claiming that his real vocation was elucidating the mere content of literature as a way of getting at and understanding life itself. With respect to literature as such, to literature as form, especially poetic form, Schwartz argued, Wilson was hopelessly at sea:

> He knows the life in back of the work. But when it becomes a point of describing the technical working, the craftsmanship and the unique forms, which are an essential part of Symbolism, and the authors who were greatly

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> influenced by the Symbolists, Wilson [in *Axel's Castle*] is impatient and hurried. He is not actually interested in the formal working which delivers the subject-matter to the reader . . . . It is for him the wrapping-paper which covers the gift; it is necessary to spend some time taking off the wrapping-paper and undoing the difficult knots of the cord tied about it, but the main thing is the gift inside, the subject matter, which always turns out to be an intimate life . . . .

Others, like Granville Hicks in "The Intransigence of Edmund Wilson" (1946), also joined the battle, deploring, for instance, Wilson's abandonment of historical criticism for psychoanalysis in *The Wound and the Bow*. But the most savage hatchet job was performed by Stanley Edgar Hyman in *The Armed Vision* (1948). Trivializing Wilson as a paraphraser (like Shaw, Mencken, and Huneker), Hyman accused Wilson of all the sins enumerated by Schwartz. But he went further, claiming that Wilson made "skillful use of other men's researches and insights, sometimes without credit"; that he was guilty of faulty analysis and judgment of poetry; that his criticism was marred by inconsistency, ambivalence, defects of taste and sensibility, by bourgeois snobbery, superficiality, nostalgia, etc. Hyman couldn't believe that Wilson knew enough Russian to write intelligently about Pushkin and insinuated that he must have plagiarized Nabokov's work!

Hyman was particularly outraged by Wilson's orthodox Freudian assumption, in *The Wound and the Bow,* that the sources of art lie in the artist's neurosis. In one of his nastier maneuvers, Hyman turned the psychoanalytic method on Wilson's own works —from *The Undertaker's Garland* (1922) onward—finding that the sensibility reflected in Wilson's prose and poetry is

> coldhearted and repelled by human contact, yet exacerbated by a rampant sensuality; lacking in creative talent, yet impelled to produce imaginative work; committed to commercialism and admiring only integrity; "democratic" and "socialist" while bitterly chauvinistic, snobbish, and contemptuous of people; almost without humor and addicted to parody and satire; aware of the complex and oversimplifying everything, from literature to human relations, in a series of false "either-ors"; hating all ties, yet unable to cut the umbilical cord binding him to school; desperate for adulation, yet repelling admirers; skeptically minded and dogmatically mannered; yearning to be Flaubert and ending up as Emma Bovary. If any of this applies to Wilson himself, and if the wound-and-bow theory makes any correlation between the extent of the wound and the power of the bow, we are reduced to wondering why Edmund Wilson is not the foremost artist of our time.

Further, while others saw Wilson's study of the corruption of Marxist thought by Soviet totalitarianism—in *To the Finland Station* (1940)—as evidence that Wilson had regained his political senses, Hyman remarked sneeringly that "his hatred of Stalin, Communism, and the Soviet Union has become obsessive and hysterical, and bitter and apparently uncontrollable references to them turn up in almost everything he writes."

The rehabilitation of Wilson as something more than a prosaic magazinist reporting on the state of letters, as a kind of better-grade Clifton Fadiman doing *New Yorker* reviews for the philistines, was in part effected by Lionel Trilling. His 1952 essay on *The Shores of Light*—entitled "Edmund Wilson: A Backward Glance"—celebrated Wilson for incarnating what Trilling called the realized idea of the literary life. He was, Trilling wrote, not only a good writer, "but he seemed to represent the life of letters in an especially cogent way, by reason of the orderliness of his mind and the bold lucidity and simplicity of his prose . . . and because of the catholicity of his interests and the naturalness with which he dealt with the past as well as with the present." Trilling laid decisively to rest the view, held by Alfred Kazin among others, that Wilson had no interest in ideas as such. For Trilling an interest in ideas "is of the very essence of

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Wilson's criticism," and he even risked an audacious comparison with the prolific but negligible George Saintsbury, who for most readers at midcentury had been totally forgotten:

> Yet we can say of Saintsbury's response to literature that, almost by its very lack of ideas and of interest in ideas, by the very indiscriminateness of its voracity, it expresses an emotion that might seem to pass for an idea—for it affirms the swarming, multitudinous democracy of letters, and testifies to the rightness of loving civilization and culture in and for themselves and of taking pleasure in human communication almost for its own sake and of the order and peace in which men may listen to each other and have time and generosity enough to listen even to those who do not succeed in saying the absolutely best things.

This idea, "if we may call it that," wrote Trilling, "is what chiefly animates the work of Edmund Wilson." And he even added that Wilson went beyond Saintsbury in his perception that "what constitutes the matter of literature is the discordant and destructive reality that threatens the peace which makes literature possible."

In the decade of the Fifties, then, the period covered by the present diary, Wilson's star was again in the ascendant. It would rise even higher, for in these years he would publish some excellent literary work in *Classics and Commercials* (1950), *The Shores of Light* (1952), *Five Plays* (1954), *The Scrolls from the Dead Sea* (1955), *Red, Black, Blond and Olive* (1956), *A Piece of My Mind: Reflections at Sixty* (1956), and *The American Earthquake* (1958). During the period he would battle with the Internal Revenue Service (for a decade he didn't bother to file any returns). He would travel to the South, to Europe and Israel, receive an honorary degree from Princeton, win the gold medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and give the Lowell lectures at Harvard.

Most of these publication events and personal distinctions—as well as the attacks upon and defenses of him—go unmentioned in his notebooks for the decade. Since Wilson by 1950 intended his diary for publication, he largely avoids duplicating what he says elsewhere in print. There is less womanizing in this decade, for his fourth marriage, to Elena Thornton Mumm in 1946, has produced happiness and a young daughter, Helen. Still, Wilson feels obliged baldly to recount episodes of their dalliance, of which this (on the beach) is illustrative: "I gave her my old hat as a pillow. Divine—I had had (the new and better kind of white wine) just enough to drink—no anesthetizing of sensation in the last moments for me, as I felt myself driving the charge home." I, for one, find the usual Wilson scorecard dismaying: the sexual act, as he customarily records it, is a biological twitch, without tenderness or idealizing emotion.

A recurrent theme is the onset of old age, as Wilson turns sixty. His mother dies, his Princeton mentor Christian Gauss dies; old flames Edna Millay and Mamaine Koestler pass away; even the old dog Reckie passes on; and Wilson and a friend brood each Memorial Day on the number of people killed in auto accidents. "Nothing but deaths through here," he records in 1952. Wilson's drinking capacity flags; he has trouble with his teeth; gout afflicts him; he is self-consciously fat and short of wind in the amorous clutch. "At my age," he writes,

> sex becomes less importunate, in the sense that you don't need it so often, and the impulse comes to seem less important. You even become impatient with this biological instinct, with its pleasure-bait, which asserts itself so much oftener than is necessary. It sometimes becomes nagging: you think, "Oh, yes: there you are again—I know all about it—you just want me to go to bed with some women so that more human babies will be born, and I have quite enough children already. I want to devote myself to more intellectual and dignified things." Yet the sexual preoccupation when it hits you, seems sometimes sharper, as if it were an elderly malady, like gout or enlargement of the prostate gland.

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He reviews many of his past affairs, seeing them as instances of victimization by this instinct, but remarks that it "is strange now to think that ten years ago, liberated from Mary [McCarthy], with whom I had spent seven years, there should have revived in me a capacity for falling in love of which I should not have thought myself capable: Mamaine [Koestler], Eva [Siphraios?], Anais [Nin], Elena [his present wife] (not all, of course, to the same degree)." But still the malady strikes: after an afternoon with Sir Isaiah Berlin in the "monastic staleness" of Oxford, where his antennae sense the "celibate jealousies" of "the pansy dons," he becomes depressed: "When I got back late to London, I leapt on Elena, who had gone to bed."

Much of the diary has the effect of the old-fashioned literary table talk, spiced by a modern preoccupation with sex. Wilson the wonderful old gossip quizzes William James, the novelist Henry's nephew, about his uncle's sex life. Sartre's preoccupation with Genet's homosexual criminality absorbs him in Paris. He interrogates a woman doctor about Gertrude Stein as a medical student in Baltimore. Spender's jealousy and Auden's homosexuality come in for a great deal of attention, of which this conversation with Auden is illustrative:

> I said, when we had left the dining room and were sitting around in the room, something about [the Marquis de] Sade in connection with [the anthropologist Geoffrey] Gorer (whom Wystan seems to be unique, among the people I know, in liking), and he suddenly began telling us that he was no good at flagellation: "When they say, 'Stop, stop!' I always stop, when what they really want is to have you go on. And I don't like to say abusive things unless I'm angry." He said that it was significant that in one of Sade's books, when some *partouze* is being arranged, that the parties are forbidden to laugh. To laugh would make the whole thing impossible.

There are, moreover, wonderful vignettes, some of them virtually full-length polished

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essays, describing Wilson's visits with or reflections on André Malraux, Nabokov, Mencken, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Angus Wilson, Allen Tate, Van Wyck Brooks, Morley Callaghan, Dorothy Parker, and Djuna Barnes.

He remarks to Dos Passos, "in connection with Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea,* that it was curious to take account of the pressure that, after the bad reception of *Across the River and into the Trees,* Hemingway had brought to bear on everybody to applaud his following book and to make this good enough little story appear a masterpiece. 'I was fascinated by the "operation,"' Dos said, 'and his timing it so as to get the jackpot [by which he meant the Nobel Prize]: I was so fascinated by the "operation" that I could hardly judge the story: it was like a magician's stunt—when he makes the girl float through the hoop, you don't notice whether she's pretty.'"

Of Nabokov he remarks that his idea "of a literary work of art is something in the nature of a Fabergé Easter egg or other elaborate knickknack." He opines to Malraux that Sartre had to drop his own work and write that massive paean to Genet "because Genet was the Sartre character which Sartre himself had not had the genius to invent." Malraux replies: "Sartre n'a jamais invente rien!" Old loyalties surface, as when Wilson agrees with Harrison Dowd that there is too much of the elocutionist about Millay's poetry, "but she and her poetry meant, and still mean, so much to me that I don't mind it at all."

And old antipathies reappear. Of the recently religious Tates he remarks, "They used to have the Confederate flag in their back room on Linden Place; in their present house they have the crucifix." Despite (or perhaps because of) the praise of Muir and Eliot, he says of Djuna Barnes, "I have never thought she had real talent." At one of the wild Cambridge parties, Wilson wound up next to Frost, about whom he had a low opinion. Frost, who looked "like a clever old elephant," surprisingly impressed Wilson. "I realized, in talking to him, that as a writer he *was* serious." But too many martinis were flowing and, as the manic Robert Lowell went off his trolley, Wilson wound up "lecturing young married people on artificial insemination while Robert was holding forth to a partly Jewish audience about what a great man Hitler had been." Elizabeth Hardwick was upstairs, once again in tears.

But Wilson's accustomed drive, the thirst for involvement in the literary life of the Fifties, is giving way now to a sense of reduced powers, to a conservation of energies. The elegiac tone appears. Increasingly he feels himself to be a survivor and cherishes encounters with those whom he knew in the Twenties. He candidly admits that he is out of touch with most writers younger than Hemingway and Faulkner. (This leads Olga Mumm, Elena's sister in Europe, to exclaim: "I thought he was supposed to be the most eminent critic in America!") In 1956 he records: "I no longer feel much desire to see old churches and things: I feel I have had all that, it has nothing more to teach me. In the limited time that is left me, I must occupy myself with the United States and with the present state of the world." But instead he is drawn back to "books on the literary life of the late eighteen and the early nineteen hundreds, the period in which I suppose I am most at home." He immerses himself in the literature of the Civil War and visits the surviving Edwardians Max Beerbohm and Compton Mackenzie. By 1958 he notes "alternate appetite and tiredness; desire still for more falls and summers and willingness at last to call my life a day." For him "the world is dimmer now" and the diminished capacity for life finds its apt Wilsonian correlative: "books on the shelves I'll never read." In "The Author at Sixty," from *A Piece of My Mind* (1956), Wilson remarks:

> I have lately been coming to feel that, as an American, I am more or less in the eighteenth century—or, at any rate, not much later than the early nineteenth . . . . I do not want any more to be bothered with the kind of contemporary conflicts that I used to go out to

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explore. I make no attempt to keep up with the younger American writers; and I only hope to have the time to get through some of the classics I have never read. Old fogeyism is comfortably closing in.

But it would be a monumental mistake to take this seriously, as did some of Wilson's detractors. There was more real life in Wilson than in most men older than he. The sex spark still flickers, the old curiosity flares up, the passion to know and read takes command. He claims full possession of the Talcottville estate, sheds some of his anti-bourgeois bias, sinks himself in his family history, becomes something like a country squire, grousing pessimistically on the conditions of the nation and the world. Books churn inside him, demanding to be written.

Shocked into a recognition of the abysmal situation of the Indians nearby, he begins to study their plight with the passion he had brought to the condition of the coal miners and factory workers in the Depression, the blacks in Haiti, the Jews in Israel, and the Zuñis out West. Out of this will come *Apologies to the Iroquois* (1960). And then there are the other books of the Sixties: *Night Thoughts* (1961), a volume of poems; *Patriotic Gore* (1962), his massive reinterpretation of the Civil War; *The Cold War and the Income Tax: A Protest* (1963), his diatribe on tax men and politicians; *O Canada: An American's Notes on Canadian Culture* (1965); and *The Bit Between My Teeth: A Literary Chronicle of 1950-1965* (1965), not to speak of new plays and poems, compilations and recycled reissues of old work, an attack on the MLA, and finally *Upstate: Records and Recollections of Northern New York* (1971).

He once said that his masters were Vico, Herder, and Taine; and there is no doubt that the historical method of literary study, as a means of laying bare the intentions and accomplishments of culture, was the driving energy of his critical production. (And of course Freud gave him a loose handle on psychological matters.) But what is striking about Wilson's career is how, like Van Wyck Brooks, he abandoned his passion for con-

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temporary developments like Symbolism and Marxist politics, and retreated from modernism to subjects safely rooted in a more remote American literary past. In Wilson's case, however, the historical method was hardly a theory, and the theory hardly a constraint to the essay-review, his characteristic form. Largely innocent of any metaphysics, Wilson performed an immensely difficult literary task—that of bringing intelligence directly to bear on a wide range of cultural subjects accessible to human curiosity. These subjects he made exciting by the sheer clarity of a rational and orderly exposition that assumed the reader's capacity to grasp the facts made plain. His serviceable style was so transparent and so deferential to his subject that it seemed the easy work of daily journalism; but in fact it represented voluminous reading and canny reflection, as well as enormous compression, concentration, and clarification. It is perhaps this aspect of his work—the style of the rational mind assuming our assent to the plainly demonstrated—that, more than anything else, accounts for the continual but offhand comparisons of Wilson with Dr. Johnson. Poets like Delmore Schwartz might complain of Wilson's indifference to form, academic critics like Hyman might carp at his evident limitations, but these provocations were themselves part of the Wilson critical project: "What we lack, then, in the United States" —as he argued in "The Critic Who Does Not Exist" (1928)— "is not writers or even literary parties, but simply serious literary criticism." Edmund Wilson generated it, and he provoked it in others. He brought to American letters a distinctive, independent, urban, even international viewpoint that, in its voluminous range, ministered to the health of American culture as a whole. Evident in his passion for literature—understood as a reflection of historical and social conditions brought into being by the struggling soul of the artist—was a concern for the well-being of civilization not evident in many of his contemporaries and not obscured by the dour pessimism of his final years.

The mystery of genius

Donald Prater A Ringing Glass: The Life of Rainer Maria Rilke. Oxford University Press, 472 pages, $27.50

reviewed by James Gardner

The circumstances in which Rainer Maria Rilke invented himself were among the least propitious to the art of poetry of any in modern times. To understand fully the nature of Rilke's achievement, one must therefore understand these circumstances in all their variety. Although Donald Prater gives a lively account of them in his new biography, the book is not without its problems.

At virtually every step of his narration, Prater has chosen to indicate the changeful spiritual condition of Rilke through reference to the poet's voluminous and energetic correspondence, piecing together his subject like a mosaic or jigsaw puzzle. In theory, this seems an appealing and self-effacing way of presenting a biographical subject, but after reading over four hundred pages of this approach, one is no closer than before to understanding Rilke's achievement. The problem with the technique is, first of all, that it sacrifices objective scholarly inquiry in favor of lengthy autobiographical details from Rilke's letters. Second, at least in its present application, it tends too readily to take Rilke at his word, when in fact the poet was adept not only at assuming a variety of postures in his correspondence with people whom he was bent on impressing, but also at pulling the wool over his own eyes.

In his writings, Rilke appears to be constantly describing his own life, but in fact he is indefatigably postulating a fictional identity to which throughout his life he was busy trying to conform. This ambition is reflected in the poem from which Prater took the title of his book (*Sonnets to Orpheus,* vol. 2, no. 13):

> Hier, unter Schwindenden, sei, im Reiche der Neige,
> sei ein klingendes Glas, das sich im Klang schon zerschlug.

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Sei—und wisse zugleich des Nicht-Seins
Bedingung,
den unendlichen Grund deiner innigen
Schwingung,
dass du sie völlig vollziehst dieses einzige Mal.

Prater translates this as follows:

Be here among the vanishing in the realm of
entropy,
be a ringing glass that shatters as it rings.

Be—and at the same time know the implication
of non-being, the endless ground of your inner
vibration,
so you can fulfill it fully just this once.

This desideratum is precisely equivalent to the battle-cry of the English aesthetes, who sought, in Walter Pater's words, "to burn always with the hard gem-like flame." Like the "shöne Seele" of the Sturm und Drang movement, and the later *engagés* and *enragés* of existentialist fiction, Rilke aspired to represent, to incarnate, a poetic world view, which would color and spiritualize everything that entered his vision. Though he would presently outgrow the socialist histrionics of his late teens—which were of a spiritual nature akin to Wilde's socialism rather than of a practical sort like Shaw's—the same energy and attitudes were soon reapplied to an internal revolution, or reconstitution of himself as pure spirit, as "ringing glass." Discontented as he was with the fairly drab bourgeois environment from which he sprang, he created a more glamorous and appealing version of himself. The protagonist of his only novel, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge (The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge),* for instance, is a young and soulful poet rebelling against an aristocratic background replete with picturesque ancestors and large, darksome mansions. Although Rilke would later create himself in Malte's own image, all of this had nothing to do with the young Rainer's thoroughly modern upbringing.

What would really be interesting to know about Rilke, and what is never even posed as a question in Prater's biography, is what exactly underpins this carefully constructed self-image of the poet. We have every reason to believe that Rilke was a fine human being who, even if susceptible to vanity and self-delusion, meant well and enriched the lives of those around him. But beyond this we know and understand little of his psychological makeup. Prater is so interested in presenting the poet to us in his own words, so concerned with the sacrosanctity of each datum, that he will not intrude himself in his narrative so much as to speculate about it. He is, furthermore, so eager lest he appear to be imposing an alien structure upon his subject that his treatment of the poet's life tends to seem flaccid and unilluminating. As the dry recitation of the poet's own words proceeds through the fifty years of his life, and as the indigent poet moves from the palace of one patron to that of another across the expanses of prewar Europe, adding and dropping friends along the way, the reader feels the need for some better understanding of the progress of the man's life, with the phases into which it can be plausibly divided. Although Prater has chosen to avoid literary criticism in the present work (a decision of questionable utility), he would still have done well to provide some fuller sense of the artistic origins of Rilke's poetry, since this presumably is what is most interesting to his readers. Above all, he would have done well to describe the work in detail, explaining precisely what changes overcame the poetry of Rilke in the thirty-five years of his fervid activity.

For the life of Rilke presents itself as a constant activity: creating poetry, writing letters, worrying about how he will manage to make ends meet. Born in Prague in 1875, Rilke was educated at a military college, and attended business school before going on to the University of Prague. He was married in 1901, but this union lasted scarcely a year. A great wanderer, in 1899 and again in 1900 he travelled with Lou Andreas-Salomé to Russia, where he met Tolstoy among other literary figures. Later he would travel to Italy and North Africa, and elsewhere, but his

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most abiding love was for Paris, where he lived at various times of his life, and where, during 1905 and 1906, he served as secretary to Rodin. He wrote constantly, beginning with *Leben und Lieder (Life and Songs)* in 1894. His mature style is first seen in *Geschichten vom lieben Gott (Stories of God)* of ten years later. In 1905 he published his *Stundenbuch (Book of Hours),* and two years later his *Neue Gedichte (New Poems).* But he is best known today for *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), the *Duineser Elegien* (*Duino Elegies*, published in 1923), and the *Sonette an Orpheus* of the same year.

Throughout, poetry was the serious and all-consuming business of Rilke's life, and it inspires two questions, neither of which Prater has been concerned to ask. First of all, exactly when and how did it happen that the poetry of Rilke underwent that subtle sea change from something rooted in, and entirely of, the nineteenth century, to an idiom as recognizably modern as twelve-tone music or Synthetic Cubism? Second, how did it come about, almost without his realizing it, that Rilke was transformed from a gifted mediocrity into one of the most important poets of the twentieth century? In order even to recognize these transformations, one would have to address certain formal questions, which Mr. Prater seems not to find very interesting in general. But more than that, one would have to inject into one's treatment of the subject a category of critical judgment without which the progress to greatness becomes invisible.

At first glance the circumstances into which Rilke was born are apt to appear anything but uncongenial to great poetry. For his first home was not some stern barracks of late Victorian probity, dominated by a dour and awful father or by a mother who jealously guarded his Christian soul from such temptations as lead young men astray. Rilke's father was a temperamental and slightly vulgar retired army officer whose business ventures came consistently to nothing, and who seems never to have gotten on too well with his wife or only child. Soon after the birth of René, later Rainer, Josef Rilke separated from his wife, and afterward had little influence upon his son's development. The boy's mother was one of those colorful demimondaines of the *fin de siècle,* colorful in the sense that she always dressed in black, and rarely missed an opportunity for some theatrical display of neurotic eccentricity. She was constantly putting books in Rainer's hands, and she even published a "slim volume" (for it seems that in the Belle Epoque one wrote only slim volumes!) called *Ephemeriden,* a collection of waspish epigrams which strove to make artistic capital out of her domestic difficulties. There is something pathetic in the brief characterization of this woman that appears in Prater's biography. Apparently, she was not a gifted writer, nor did she possess great intelligence. Rather, in her insistent quest for individuality, for social advancement, and for intellectual renown, she made of herself an unwitting and unlovely caricature, parroting without comprehension the vanguard movements of the day.

She is worth dwelling upon in this connection only because the young Rainer, who felt suffocated by her influence, until late into his thirties ran the constant risk of unknowingly falling prey to the same fortune. The early years of the poet's career, as described minutely by Prater, show all the promise of a doomed mediocrity. For precisely because he was so intent upon becoming a poet from his earliest days, it seemed unlikely that he would ever overcome his youthful attraction to the glamour of society, which had been his principal reason for wanting to undertake that career. It flattered Rilke to relate to his correspondents that his childhood had been one of dreary hardship, of grammar schools and military colleges which sought to hold in check the irrepressible impulses of this young Orpheus, who managed finally to break away into a bohemian freedom. In fact, his poetic longings were recognized and encouraged from an early age by his adoring if difficult mother and his friends in school. But this was not a reality that could be easily reconciled with his carefully cultivated self-image.

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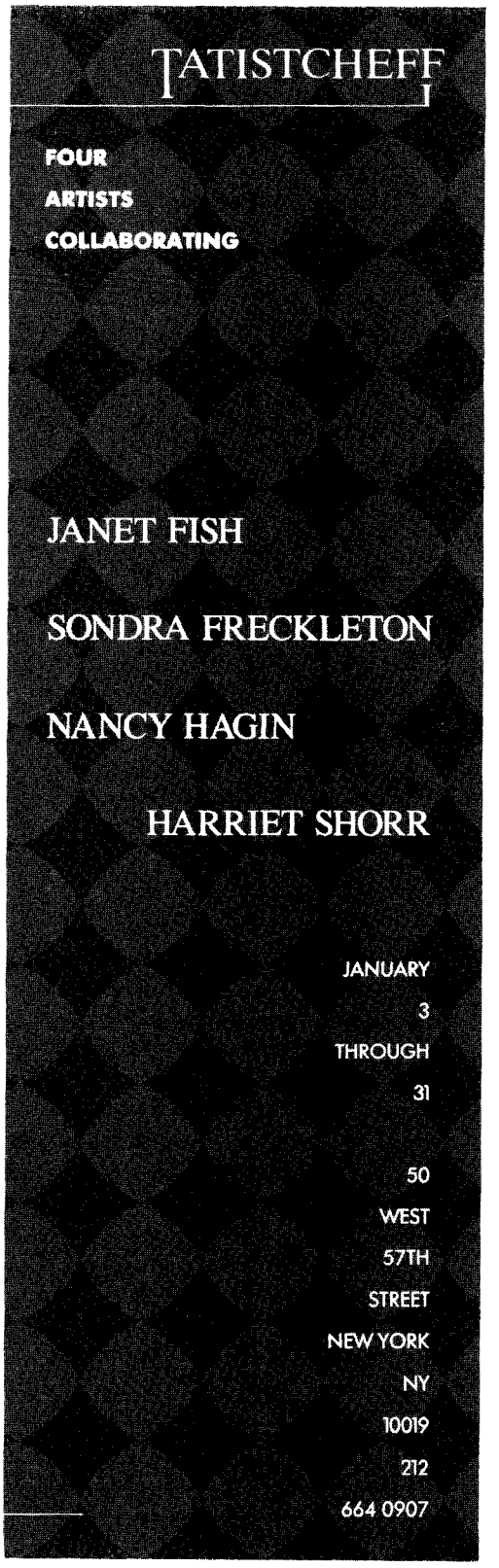
In understanding the nature of Rilke and his poetry, the first thing we must discard is the widely held belief that he was a thinker. If there was any cause to entertain such an idea in the first place, Prater's biography will readily remove it. There is a tendency to think of Rilke as a philosophical poet primarily because Heidegger, whose *Sein und Zeit* appeared a year after Rilke's death, was influenced by Rilke's language. Those who come to Rilke's poetry, as often happens, through Heidegger's philosophy are astonished by the degree to which the former presaged the latter. It is thus in lines of verse like:

> Gesang, wie du ihn lehrst, ist nicht Begehr,
> nicht Werbung um ein endlich noch Erreichtes;
> Gesang ist Dasein. Für den Gott ein Leichtes.
> Wann aber *sind* wir? Und wann wendet *er*
>
> an unser Sein die Erde und die Sterne?
>
> (Song, as you teach it, is not desire, nor wooing of something finally achieved. Song is Being. An easy thing for a god. But when *are* we? And when will *he* turn to the advantage of our Being the earth and the stars?)

Prater is generally suspicious of the deeper import of such pronouncements, and is careful never to fall prey, as Maurice Blanchot most notably has done, to a misdirected reverence for the poet's thoughts. Although some great poets were also excellent logicians, their logic did not make their poetry, and at all events Rilke was not one of their number. His preferred reading, as it is recorded by Prater, tended to be poetry, belles lettres, and history, and rarely if ever philosophy. Rilke was forever overflowing with pre-rational, almost childlike pronouncements. And even when these were calculated to produce an effect of Orphic naïveté, they still denoted a mind that for whatever reasons was unable to bring together two thoughts by way of a syllogism. Nevertheless, it would be a profound misunderstanding of the poet to believe that his thoughts as well as his



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words were the unmediated outpourings of a soul possessed of an elemental, Heraclitean simplicity. For quite aside from the fact that Rilke was trying to seem at all times the Poet, he was greatly influenced by all the literary and intellectual movements that were then current in the European literary community.

It was from Rodin, whose acquaintance Rilke made in his mid-twenties, that he learned the artistic dictum of "travailler toujours." But in fact this merely crystallized for Rilke something that he had always felt, a massive and all-consuming need to produce poetry. The industry that he revealed early in his life is truly astonishing. Reading his early efforts, one has the sense that the young man was compelling himself to produce poems every day, some days two or three in an afternoon.

As with many a young poet, Rilke's eagerness to write often surpassed his having something to say, and in order to win the good graces of his immediate benefactors he was prone to utter sentiments one would never expect to flow at any age from the pen of the poet who would one day write the *Sonette an Orpheus*. Here is an early *cri de coeur* against a call for disarmament:

> Ermannet euch! Gefährten, Freunde, Brüder,
> die ihr doch stets das Vaterland geliebt,
> nun merket wohl: "Es giebt kein Waffen nieder,
> weils keinen Frieden ohne Waffen giebt!"
>
> (Be warned! Companions, friends and brothers, you who still love the fatherland, mark well: there can be no reduction in arms, when without arms there can be no peace!)

His first book of poems, *Leben und Lieder,* which he published in 1894 at the age of eighteen, makes a claim to a deeper experience of the world than he could possibly have had at the time. The principal influences on this earliest work are clearly Heine and Goethe, although Rilke would later claim scarcely to have read, and never to have understood, Goethe until late in life. His early and vague sympathies with socialism in this brief period are revealed in a poem typically entitled *Vorwärts* ("Forward!"), in which he declaims:

> Immer vorwärts! Deine Stärke
> liegt in deiner eignen Brust,
> nur dass du sie erst durch Werke
> unermüdlich wecken musst.
>
> (Ever forward! Your strength lies in your own breast, only that you must awaken it through untiring labor.)

Only a few years later, he has more or less outgrown these edifying sentiments, and his poetry becomes much more closely allied to the poetry of the Jugendstil poet Otto Julius Bierbaum, as well as to the eccentric rhythms of Arno Holz, as is seen this passage:

> Sieben Gefühle aus Silber sind
> über deine dunkelspiegelnde Seele gespannt.
> Sieben Saiten der Sehnsucht.
> Und ein jeder Wind,
> der an den Strand
> deiner lichten Stirne getrieben,
> muss seine Kühle
> durch deine sieben Gefühle
> sieben . . . .
>
> (Seven feelings made of silver span your darkly mirroring soul. Seven strings of yearning. And each wind that is pressed against the strand of your light forehead, must sift its coolness through those seven feelings).

One of the most potent influences upon Rilke, as upon most young German poets of this time, was Stefan George, who was largely responsible for instilling the young Rilke with that sense of the poet's priestly responsibility, which he was never to outgrow entirely. George is important in this context since he emphatically represents the creature that Rilke might so easily have become. Some mediocre artists display such a talent for imposture that if that same talent could be redirected in the vicinity of art, they would probably have created some-

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thing important. George's poetry is smooth and even, and in the vacuous ellipsis which was his preferred tone he never took a false step. But aside from the monotony of this technique, he never gets anything decidedly right; he never fulfills that ultimate criterion of all art, that it introduce into the universe something more than there was before the artistic act. This then was the danger that unconsciously beset the young Rilke, who was something of a poser himself. That he was always a good and large-hearted person, while George was a frantic egomaniac, would not necessarily have saved his art.

In order for Rilke to vanquish these tendencies in himself, it was necessary for him to effect a poetic transformation. Yet it was not comparable to the revolutionary transformation brought about by Arnold Schoenberg in music, nor was it comparable to the breakthroughs of Analytic Cubism. Rather, Rilke's poetry underwent a gradual, steady modification in degree that continued until it produced a difference in kind. For the seeds of even the latest poetry of Rilke, which is contemporary with Eliot and Apollinaire, are to be found in the very earliest Symbolist poetry that he was writing in his teens and twenties. But no one who compares the latest poetry with the earliest can have any doubt that a transformation has taken place. Not only has the later poet felt emboldened to allow the unique and specific context of the poem to dictate its metrical laws, a liberty he would not have permitted himself in his younger days, but in addition Rilke has done the essentially modern thing, almost without precedent before this century, of developing his theme through an intuited and disconnected order of sensations and allowing this new order to supplant the much more regular progression of all earlier poetry.

Rilke's first solid poetic achievement, *Das Buch der Bilder,* shows his debt to Conrad Ferdinand Meyer, the inventor of the so-called *Dinggedicht,* a self-consciously artistic short poem usually describing with grace and relish some single striking visual image. This is the aesthetic impulse that guides

important works by

balthus
butler
chagall
dubuffet
giacometti
lam
mac iver
mason
millares
miró
riopelle
rouan
saura
tanguy
zao wou-ki

pierre matisse gallery
41 east 57th street
new york 10022

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such well-known poems of his early period as "The Panther," "The Flamingos," and "The Torso of Apollo." A typical example of this period is "Die Kurtisane" ("The Courtisan"), a sonnet which begins:

> Venedigs Sonne wird in meinem Haar
> ein Gold bereiten: aller Alchemie
> erlauchten Ausgang. Meine Brauen, die
> den Brücken gleichen, siehst du sie
>
> hinführen ob der lautlosen Gefahr
> der Augen, die ein heimlicher Verkehr
> an die Kanäle schliesst, so dass das Meer
> in ihnen steigt und fällt und wechselt . . . .
>
> (In my hair the Venetian sun is preparing gold: the brilliant end of all alchemy. My eyebrows, like the bridges, you can see extend over the noiseless danger of the eyes, which a secret commerce allies to the canal, so that the sea rises and falls and changes in them.)

The metaphorical thrust of this poem is allied to its point of reference through the texture of similes. This device endows them with a slightly more commonsensical quality than his later poetry possesses—a feeling of being more fully grounded in the real world. But already we can hear in the rhythms of "aller Alchemie/erlauchten Ausgang" the voice of the later Rilke of the *Duineser Elegien* and the *Sonette an Orpheus,* and the extravagant metaphor of the eyebrows and the eyes will find many parallels in the corporeal imagery of his later poetry.

Nothing prior to the *Duineser Elegien* quite prepares us for the ecstatic fanfare and thrilling energy of these hexameters:

> Dass ich dereinst, an dem Ausgang der
> grimmigen Einsicht,
> Jubel und Ruhm aufsinge zustimmenden
> Engeln.
>
> Dass von den klar geschlagenen Hämmern
> des Herzens
> keiner versage an weichen, zweifelnden oder
> reissenden Saiten.
>
> (Someday, emerging at last from this terrifying vision, may I burst into jubilant praise of assenting angels! May not even one of the clear-struck keys of the heart fail to respond through alighting on slack or doubtful or rending strings! [Translation by J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender.]).

But it is in the *Sonette an Orpheus* that Rilke gives the fullest and most mature demonstration of his powers. Here he has managed to purge his former Georgian mysticism of all of its *fin de siècle* surplusage, until it has been honed down to the barest yet most expressive essentials. He is interested in etherealizing all of human life, in distilling out all but the most essential categories, the very building blocks, of experience: questions of life and death, of love and desire. If poetry was once postulated as the reason for his being, now Being itself finds its most thorough statement, and most natural analogue, in the flight of song:

> Aber noch ist uns das Dasein verzaubert; an
> hundert
> Stellen ist es noch Ursprung. Ein Spielen von
> reinen
> Kräften, die keiner berührt, der nicht kniet
> und bewundert.
>
> Worte gehen noch zart am Unsäglichen
> aus . . .
> Und die Musik, immer neu, aus den
> bebendsten Steinen,
> baut im unbrauchbaren Raum ihr
> vergöttlichtes Haus.
>
> (Yet still is existence magical to us; in a hundred places is its immediate source. A game of pure powers, which no one can touch without kneeling and marveling. Words yet go softly towards the unsayable . . . And music, ever new, out of the insecurest stones, builds in unusable space her heavenly house.)

It is a shame that at the end of Prater's biography we understand so little the man who was capable of writing such great poetry. He remains hidden behind the insistent self-

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image, which is perhaps best illustrated, during the period of Rilke's great poetic achievement, by the story of the inspiration for the *Duineser Elegien*. The story has been told often, and Stephen Spender and J. B. Leishman describe it well in the introduction to their translation of Rilke's poems (published by W. W. Norton in 1939):

> In October Rilke visited his friend, Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe, at Schloss Duino, near Trieste, and from her departure in the middle of December to her return in the following April, he remained in the castle alone. One day he received a trouble-some business letter which required an immediate and careful answer; to settle his thoughts, he went out into the roaring wind and paced to and fro along the bastions, the sea raging two hundred feet below. Suddenly he stopped, for it seemed that from the midst of the storm a voice had called to him . . . .

After reading the four hundred pages of Prater's biography, and thus becoming familiar with the tenor of Rilke correspondence, one recognizes something typical to the point of caricature in this divine frenzy by which the poet was flattered to believe he had been possessed. Although Rilke might here have been telling the truth (and I feel sure he could not resist a certain embellishment), it was precisely this desire to play the poet which threatened until that very moment to entomb the man in gifted mediocrity. How then was he saved from this destiny? Unless we begin to believe in divine intercession, the answer to this question will be found not in Rilke's own explanations, but rather in his life and his study of earlier writers. After reading Prater's biography of Rilke, one is enriched with a detailed tapestry of the poet's life, but one does not feel that one has come truly to know and understand the poet's evolution. The central question of his life, that unforeseen accession to greatness, remains a mystery.

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Fiction chronicle

Worlds apart

by Donna Rifkind

The weight of history crashes through every scene of David Pryce-Jones's newest novel, *The Afternoon Sun.*[1] The action takes place in the years between 1840 and the 1980s and stretches through Germany, Austria, Hungary, France, and England. Of the author's many novels, some, like *The Stranger's View,* have similarly wide historical peripheries, while others (*The Sands of Summer, Quondam*) are limited domestic dramas. What makes *The Afternoon Sun* problematic as a novel is the way the book's scope has compelled the author to handle his characters' fates as though they are the results of a search through archives.

The book opens with the story of a Jewish foundling, abandoned on a German roadside, who is given the name Gustav Ellingen and delivered to an orphanage in Nuremberg. At the age of ten or eleven the boy escapes with a friend, who runs toward what he imagines to be his home. In what the author calls "the version handed down from Gustav," Ellingen recalls: "Not to be caught together, I chose the opposite direction. With my back to the afternoon sun." The emphasis on history is apparent even in this moment of personal whimsy and is a habit throughout the book: the author comments, "Gustav Ellingen might have played his part in Bismarck's Germany, or further to the west, in the France of Louis Napoleon and the Third Republic." Instead, the child heads for Vienna and finds a room in a boardinghouse.

At this point a persistent documentary style takes over, as one learns of Gustav's life through letters, newspaper clippings, and a type of narrative journalism into which the author often lapses and which makes the action seem like a quick series of snapshots taken from a distance: "In wedding photographs Gustav is standing well to the fore, evidently in order to diminish Else's height. For the first night, they travelled no further than his suite in the Imperial Hotel. A double-window opened on to a balcony, and they stepped out."

One pieces together from these various "sources" the following story of Gustav's development into a powerful industrialist: he breaks with a group of students whose curriculum is increasingly anti-Semitic and becomes the partner of a banker named Schlesinger, who finances joint-stock companies. In the stock-exchange crisis of 1873, Schlesinger is among the thousands who lose their savings. Gustav buys into productive companies, sails through the crisis, and emerges a prosperous railway tycoon. From there, with the help of an Austrian prince named Solkovsky, he builds a huge steel-making plant called Concordia, situated northeast of Vienna, marries, and settles into a life of fantastic wealth. He designs an enormously ugly estate at Pernsdorf—a sort of Viennese Tara—and appears to speak

1 *The Afternoon Sun,* by David Pryce-Jones; Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 214 pages, $15.95.

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exclusively in aphorisms: "'Money prevents fear, that's its point. Those with the greatest fears need the greatest wealth.'"

With little fuss, Gustav's wife dies in childbirth, leaving a daughter named Henriette. Here the author offers a courteously remote portrait of the permanence of Gustav's loss: "Not a single room was to stay in the dark. Until the end of his life, shutters were to be left open, in winter especially, so that as he turned in past the lodge and up the drive, he could see lights shining everywhere in the silhouette of his home, in simulation of welcome."

Gustav's reaction to the loss of his wife takes the shape of a renewed devotion to acquisition. As soon as Henriette is old enough, at age ten, to get an idea of the extent of her father's wealth, he begins training her to run the business, and the aphorisms continue to flow: "The purpose of money was use, not accumulation, and those who understood that were free spirits. To such as them, money was a medium, like water to a fish or air to an animal." As if to mock his past, in 1901 Gustav builds an orphanage for Jewish children, called the Ellingen Waisenhaus, "in a place from which none of them would wish to run away."

From here the tale of wealth continues in a manner which will seem familiar to viewers of television mini-series. Gustav becomes a baron; he builds a country estate called Sagodvar in western Hungary; he takes a countess as a mistress; he buys a Derby-winning horse, uninventively named Kismet. On Henriette's eighteenth birthday, he transfers his shares in Concordia to her, and she, like a good heiress, begins to attend board meetings, "sensing the surge of power in numerals across the pages."

All of this good fortune cannot last for long, as the narrative heavily reminds us. "What could the future bring except more of the same, the luxuries of Pernsdorf and Sagodvar, boundless years of Derby winners, columns of figures in purple ink down the right-hand margins of ledgers?" What, indeed? At times one feels that in this book any more foreshadowing would become déjà vu, and that any more irony would become parody. In any event, the future brings this: Henriette marries a banker named Rudi Hechter as World War I begins. In November of 1916, the same month in which Kaiser Franz Josef dies, she gives birth to a boy which she names Jules, "as though to show that even in war-time French affinities were natural." Meanwhile, Gustav loses all of his four million gold crowns when the Habsburg dynasty ends along with the war and paper currency depreciates to nothing. He dies after two strokes and many long months of illness, during Jules's infancy. The baby is hyperactive, prone to nightmares; he refuses to speak. His mother, hands wringing, has also to contend with the future of Concordia and Gustav's graveside memorial, "as if the one could not be settled without the other, as if the man and all his works might vanish without trace and she would have become the orphan." This is, one is given to understand, a family of orphans, where each successive generation is bound to follow its course alone.

With increasing speed, more plot developments spring up, then disappear: at seven, Jules's skill at the piano inexplicably cures his autism. Henriette's husband starts making frequent trips to Paris, and she discovers that he is having homosexual affairs. Jules goes off to boarding school in England in 1930, brings home an obnoxious young teacher named Rex Smail-Turner for the holidays, and Rex becomes a permanent part of the household, forming what one can see from pages beforehand will be a ménage à trois with Henriette and her husband. At this pace, it is nearly impossible to attribute significance to any of the events that are occurring; each scene, crowded among all the others, seems to be just another archival detail, as if the accumulation of information in the novel is more important to the author than the development of characters. When Henriette's husband travels to Algiers and comes down with a fever which kills him, the scene is so concisely written that it is, like most in the book, anesthetized of emotion.

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By the time the Anschluss rolls around, Henriette and Rex marry and go to live in England. Jules, who has been living with a Hungarian woman named Litzi at Sagodvar, is deported with her, and they die in a concentration camp, leaving a son named Julius (the next of the family orphans), who is brought to England to live with Henriette. The narration of this final section of the book switches abruptly from the author's voice to that of Julius. Obsessed with the Holocaust and his parents' deaths, Julius spends his adolescence and young adulthood digging in the family archives for information:

> [Baron Gustav's] name would be in hundreds of indexes, I thought, his life and times must emerge in the form of a biography, spontaneous and coherent. The search for Gustav has taken place in libraries, in rooms thickly smelling of dust . . . .
>
> [These letters] say everything and nothing. Between their lines, in all that loneliness, in all that vividness, is the face of Litzi . . . . Where are they buried? Where? Who is with a wreath at that grave-side?

This last fanatical search for the past is the least adequate of any portion of the book because it is the most personal, and yet it continues to occur at far too great a distance from the reader. One understands intellectually why Julius is obsessed with his parents' fate, but because of the book's remote, spare tone, neither he nor any of the other characters show any believable emotion. Admittedly, most novels that speak of the Holocaust have had to find an oblique, careful way of allowing horror to poke through the mesh of a constructed narrative. Few are successful. But here especially one feels that the death camps and cattle trucks are just more facts from the archive to be stuffed into this family history, that as the author presents them they are not so much more important than the horse races at Sagodvar or a trip to Algiers.

Pryce-Jones's mock-documentary method, then, makes the characters in *The Afternoon Sun* too inaccessible within events that are too systematically placed into a grand historical scheme. The history is of course fascinating in itself, and accurate, yet it never seems to fuse with the fiction that is supposed to be living within it; indeed, Pryce-Jones's characters seem throughout the book to become more and more removed from their milieu. His distance has a politeness about it, but politeness has little meaning and no effective use against the speeding circumstances he thrusts his characters into, and none of these characters are drawn strongly enough to betray any real personality in their aphoristic speeches and vague, fairy-tale actions. As for the excavation of character through the "discovery" of newspaper clippings and letters, one never feels that this kind of metonymy is effective in the world of the novel; in using a letter or a column of newsprint to represent a living personality, the part cannot stand for the whole. Here and there in this book are the seeds of a novel that never manage to spring to life. The rest, as they say, is history.

The world of Anita Brookner's *A Misalliance*[2] is as choked and close as *The Afternoon Sun*'s is smooth and inaccessible. Recently published in England, the book presents yet another Brookner heroine who, like Edith Hope in *Hotel du Lac* and Sofka in *Family and Friends,* finds that intelligence guarantees for herself neither happiness nor power. Blanche Vernon's husband of twenty years, Bertie, has vacated their London flat to live with a young woman named Mousie who holds a degree in computer sciences. Blanche spends most of her time trying not to let this crisis overwhelm her, but she is having a rather bad time of it: she gets panicky at the National Gallery, in whose paintings she searches for answers to her big questions about devotion and betrayal, and she understands precisely the extent to which her new

2 *A Misalliance,* by Anita Brookner; Jonathan Cape, 191 pages, £9.95. This will be published in the United States by Pantheon in March.

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singleness has banished her from the complacent life of couples and the larger world they seem to control. "The world is not always waiting for one to discover it, particularly when one is my age," she thinks; "the world, that entity bandied about so frequently, is in fact an endless multiplicity of impermeable concerns."

What makes Blanche's pain especially forceful is her perfect understanding of how she feels, why she feels it, and what she will do as a result. It is this rationality that gives the novel its irony; in Brookner's calm presentation of Blanche, her problem, and her attempt to resolve it, there is the underlying knowledge that nothing Blanche thinks or does will necessarily improve her situation, and that in all probability the *deus ex machina,* on its way from backstage, will blow a fuse and break down. "Nevertheless," Brookner writes, "she sought instruction, hoping for a sign, hoping to do better."

At the hospital where Blanche does volunteer work, she becomes interested in a child who refuses to speak, seeing something of her own grim stoicism in the little girl's behavior. Interest in the child grows into preoccupation. She converses with the girl's mother, an impatient young woman with odd, expensive clothes. Blanche becomes an acquaintance, offers to babysit, and understands exactly why she is doing this: the little girl Elinor's manners, Blanche notes "with something like sorrow, were as punctilious as her own." She invents a dignity in Elinor to accompany her silence, as if the three-year-old were capable of the adult strength of character Blanche herself has been forced to develop; and she recognizes the child "as being one like herself, refusing, at a heroic level, the role that was offered her and which she considered unsuited to her desires."

This recognition turns out to be much too clever, but Blanche nonetheless allows herself to be drawn into the lives of Elinor and her parent, Sally Beamish, who is not the girl's natural mother but is married to her mysteriously absent father, Paul. Sally is a restless, petulant woman looking for ways to return to the life she led before she was married, which seems to have consisted of a hazy cycle of parties and cruises. She resents her responsibilities in caring for Elinor while Paul travels around the world with his nearly mythologically rich and strange employers, and she is willing to accept Blanche as a peculiar but convenient patroness. For her part, Blanche examines Sally's personality as if the younger woman's life were a lesson; she is "both appalled and charmed by such fecklessness, and she could not but compare it favorably with her own caution, the modesty of her own expectations." Sally represents for Blanche what the painted nymphs in the National Gallery seem mockingly to symbolize to her: the abiding satisfaction in being a recipient of pleasure, not a supplier of it; in being a predator for others' affection, not a victim of one's own unrequited longing. Blanche, whose character burdens her as if she were nailed to it, is unable to do anything but the right thing, the honorable act, the gesture of kindness of which Sally is by nature incapable. Sally does manage to tolerate, though not without contempt, Blanche's large subsidies, habitually left under the teapot on her visits to Sally's messy basement flat.

So Blanche marches through this grim episode in her life, doing good because she cannot help it, needing but not expecting some affection in return for a decency which begins to look more and more perverse for being so inappropriate. Brookner creates a stifling setting for Blanche's joyless mission: it is high summer, and airless, and everybody is away on vacation. Everywhere there is dusty, artificial light, "bright yet sour, . . . [which] kindled an habitual feeling of uneasiness . . . . In the uncertain light of these uncertain days, her thoughts turned to images of an illusory but brilliant heat . . . as the afternoon emptied and discouraged movement."

A story with so much emptiness and discouragement would stop twitching and lie dead without some occasional humor, and Brookner supplies that humor in her usual subtle way. Blanche's meals—"a single chop, an isolated Dover sole—seemed to her

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rather more suitable subjects for still-life painting than for consumption." Thinking about an old suitor, Blanche reflects "that if she had married him she would certainly still be married to him, since he tended to read the same kind of fiction as she did."

After some time, Sally manages to push Blanche into a grand, final act of service: Blanche is required to make a trip to the Dorchester Hotel, where Paul is staying for a few days with his vaguely monstrous American employers, Mr. and Mrs. Demuth. Sally wants Blanche somehow to persuade the Demuths to let Paul return to look after his wife and child. Since it is not yet clear what duty Paul performs for the Demuths, nor why they seem to be holding him captive, Blanche feels completely unequal to this task, but is compelled by what she knows to be Sally's emotional domination of her to do it anyway.

At the Dorchester, the circumstances and her own part in them at last shift into a coherent whole: "All this nonsensical thinking, dividing people into two categories, and my longing to know more about the one from which I am excluded, has driven me slightly mad." The elusive Paul, she finds, is not imprisoned by tyrants at all; in fact, he is bizarrely comfortable in his position as part-babysitter, part-playmate for the helpless Mrs. Demuth. "He did not look like anybody's employee. Nor did he look like anybody's husband. He looked entirely temporary, like a stage character."

When it becomes obvious that Paul has no intention of leaving the Demuths, Blanche's will to carry things through collapses for the first time, and, rewarded with a migraine the size of Sussex, she makes a slow, nightmare-like escape. At home in bed, tended by a concerned neighbor, she embarks on the book's longest and final indulgence in self-analysis. "Just as some women turn to drink, to food, to shoplifting, Blanche had turned to flirtations with other lives, good works, and uplifting pastimes . . . trying, without prejudice, to learn the art of self-sufficiency." "To have assumed that she could love [Sally and Elinor] and make them love her was more than folly; it was an error. To have assumed a bond between Elinor and herself was more serious a fault. The child was not hers to love." "They saw my attempts at love as a misappropriation . . . . It was a misalliance, she thought. I have never fully understood the laws of property. If I had, I should not be alone, at this moment, and apparently forced to remain so."

In Blanche, Brookner has presented the harsh, close, hurt feelings of a character similar to one of Barbara Pym's "excellent women," except that, unlike a Pym heroine, Brookner's will not accept her circumstances and sit down, sighing, to make do with a cup of tea. Instead she complains; she makes it obvious that her suffering is the most important part of her; she makes stupid choices. After the relentlessly pointed descriptions of Blanche's state of mind, one is grateful for the occasional sharp details of other characters and settings—one in fact wishes for more of them: Sally, the eternal party girl, wears "avant-garde garments" and her flat is a "grotto" whose windows are spattered with "the dried spore of old raindrops"; a summer evening is "livid and smelt of drains"; on Mrs. Demuth's "swollen childish wrists her bracelets had a mineral heaviness." Here are the kinds of critical details, missing from David Pryce-Jones's book, that make characters, however minor their roles, seem to be complex, to live as if each were in a tiny world, in occasional communication with others.

Like all of Brookner's novels, *A Misalliance* is compact, and concerned more with intelligent observations about behavior than with elaborations of plot. But the book succeeds in its substitution of irony and subtle characterization for action. This is a brief intellectual adventure from which one exits, unlike the heroine, with satisfaction.

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Notebook

Sundays in the dark with the Whitney

by Roger Kimball

This fall, in its continuing effort to enlighten us about the wonders and complexities of American art, the Public Education Department at the Whitney Museum of American Art sponsored a series of three panel discussions entitled "Sundays at Six: Issues in Contemporary Art." Subsidized in part by a grant from the Mnuchin Foundation, each of the biweekly sessions ran for about an hour and a half. The first two installments, "The Coming Fin de Siècle" and "The Neo-futurist Moment: Art and Technology," swelled the Whitney's modest downstairs public space to overflowing with well over a hundred people in attendance; the third, "The Critic in the Mirror," was less popular, but still managed to fill a good two thirds of the chairs set out for the event.

It must be said at the outset, however, that the title "Sundays at Six: Issues in Contemporary Art" was something of a misnomer. For while the sessions did indeed convene Sundays at six p.m., the "issues" discussed were rarely the issues to be found in contemporary *art*. What one heard at the Whitney those several Sundays was mostly the rehearsal of various clichés abroad in the contemporary *art world*, which of course is a different thing entirely. What one was treated to, in other words, was the elaboration of a filigree—or perhaps one should say a haze—of fashionable "ideas" and attitudes that have for some time proliferated in the vicinity of contemporary art, enshrouding, occluding, or—as it sometimes seems—replacing it altogether. Nevertheless, though it tends to proceed from a common set of assumptions about art and culture, this filigree or haze comes in a variety of colors, as it were, and each of the Whitney's "Sundays at Six" displayed its own distinctive palette. Taken together, they made up a veritable color wheel of contemporary attitudinizing about art.

The moderator of the first session, "The Coming Fin de Siècle," was the poet and critic David Shapiro. The panel included the artist Lynda Benglis, the critic Maurice Berger, the artist and critic Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, and the artist, writer, and editor Lucio Pozzi. Mr. Shapiro began by announcing his "rage against false labels," among which he identified the label *fin de siècle* itself. In fact, most participants in this first session had hardly anything to say about the coming *fin de siècle*—just as well, perhaps, since their comments did nothing to suggest they would have been reliable prophets.

Mr. Pozzi spoke first. Noting the need for artistic renewal, he called for an emancipation from artistic conformism. In our time, he went on to say, when the gestures of the avant-garde have become the dominant ethos of the art world, this emancipation must include above all distancing oneself from the conventions of the avant-garde: its cult of novelty, habit of overturning traditional forms, and so on. Accordingly, he urged artists and critics to "transgress the forms of transgression" in their search for

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genuine artistic "regeneration." There were a few potentially amusing moments, as when Mr. Pozzi suggested that this new artistic drive could "help us mutate into the next biological cycle of life" (what choice mystifications must lurk behind that comment!). But by and large Mr. Pozzi confined himself to dispensing edifying commonplaces. Lynda Benglis—the one artist on the panel who was not also a writer—sounded a much quieter note. She offered some very brief remarks about her own work, told us she was interested in art that "depended on technology," and made some cryptic comments about art and science both being engaged in an attempt to "redesign nature."

Mr. Berger presented us with a more-or-less standard Marxist lecture on the situation of contemporary culture. In one of the session's few references to the *fin de siècle,* past or future, he drew an analogy between *fin de siècle* Vienna and our own time, criticizing both for being apolitical and ahistorical. The Sixties, according to Mr. Berger, were an exception to this "political complacency"; they were an oasis of activism in a desert of reaction. In what degenerated into a somewhat rambling discourse, Mr. Berger also found occasion to criticize the "bias and partisanship" of modernism—which, because of its interest in the formal qualities of art, was likewise said to be "ahistorical"—and to urge artists, collectors, dealers, and critics to enlist themselves on the side of historically aware, socially activist art. "True radicalism" is the goal of art, Mr. Berger assured us, and concluded by citing the plight of the homeless as evidence of our short-sightedness. Of course, he never specified just what the homeless might have to do with art—how could he have done so, since they have nothing at all to do with art?—but for those susceptible to such pious invocations a mention of the homeless undoubtedly contributed something to the aura of virtue with which Mr. Berger was attempting to surround himself.

There was none of this call to the ramparts in Mr. Gilbert-Rolfe's contribution. In a remarkable smorgasbord of chic literary theory, he began by telling us that he wanted to mount "a mild attack on periodicity in general"—which meant an attack on the cogency of notions like *fin de siècle* in particular. Among other things, Mr. Gilbert-Rolfe informed us that we "fetishize the concept of conclusion," and called accordingly for "an end to endings," an end to "Euro-centered art," an end to the "Christocentric" world view we still find ourselves imprisoned by. In this context, he also urged us to get beyond what he described as "the tribal history of the West," and to dispense with "the idea of relevance," apparently long since discredited.

There was more—obligatory nods to Jacques Derrida's contention that thought is primarily about "difference" and so on—but in truth Mr. Gilbert-Rolfe was much more impressive for his style than his substance. In many respects, he must be counted the evening's star performer. His arch, world-weary sophistication provided an entertaining spectacle, and he knew how to brandish his cigarettes and his English accent to achieve the best effect before an American audience. He was aggressively, alarmingly articulate—almost Faustian, one is tempted to say—and provided "The Coming Fin de Siècle" with its only moments of verbal drama.

Mr. Berger challenged Mr. Gilbert-Rolfe's criticism of "periodicity in general," claiming that the marking off of historical periods is sometimes legitimate for political reasons. For example, he said, it is worth thinking of the Sixties as a distinct historical period because it was marked by a "compassion for the poor" and because the "academic Right" has consistently castigated the Sixties as a period of decadence and cultural degradation. Adopting a term from Michel Foucault, he alluded again and again to the Sixties as an "archive" of political and cultural wisdom that could be used as "a weapon against the Right." In case it had escaped notice, he also testified that for him the issue of social responsibility is "never irrelevant," and mentioned—presumably as an example of socially responsible behavior—that he would soon be organizing an exhibition of

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the art of the Vietnam War. Mr. Gilbert-Rolfe retorted that he wanted a "more sophisticated response" to the Right. It is not that he disagreed with Mr. Berger's political sentiments, exactly, but he was against introducing politics into the "gallery context" because it distracts from the "political context." In his view, the "political art" of someone like Hans Haacke—most of whose "works" are indistinguishable from political sloganeering—is neither art nor politics but a species of self-righteous moralizing whose chief function is to congratulate the audience on sentiments they already share.[1] I found it difficult to disagree with him on this last point, though I didn't really see that viewing art as "an aspect of linguistic practice," as Mr. Gilbert-Rolfe proposed, provided a much more compelling alternative.

At times, the exchange between Messrs. Berger and Gilbert-Rolfe became almost heated—at least Mr. Berger warmed noticeably; Mr. Gilbert-Rolfe merely got more chillingly wry. Their exchange seemed at moments like a parody of the dispute between Naphta and Settembrini in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain,* though of course it lacked the definitive conclusion Mann provided for that debate. And it also had the virtue of illustrating two distinct species of a common genus in contemporary cultural life. For where Mr. Berger epitomized the garden-variety academic Marxist, the Marxist who looks for the social utility of art and still dreams of being politically *engagé,* Mr. Gilbert-Rolfe is a specimen of what we might call the Higher Marxism, a Marxism that has replaced engagement with cynicism and revolution with opportunism, a Marxism so thoroughly skeptical that it often dispenses with the tag "Marxism" altogether. But a rose is a rose by any name, and though the Higher Marxism may eschew the name, Mr. Gilbert-Rolfe bore adequate witness that it preserves the habits of thought and basic world view of Marxism intact.

The remarks from the audience pretty much followed the same course. There were statements about the foreign and domestic policies of the United States, a question about the desirability of using art as a "tool of the class struggle," and so on. In a last, tired effort, Mr. Berger stated his desire to champion the art of "disenfranchised people," and even went so far as to suggest that art is good if it comes from such "disenfranchised people," among whose numbers he included the denizens of the East Village and Cuba. After that, even an audience comment to the effect that serious art "embeds politics within as a metaphor" seemed a relief. Time was running out, however. Mr. Shapiro ended the session by telling us that he hoped that the participants had avoided descending to clichés—a statement one could only assume he had written out beforehand and had not had the leisure to emend.

The second installment of the Whitney's "Sundays at Six," "The Neofuturist Moment: Art and Technology," was a signal illustration of the adage *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.* The moderator was Hal Foster, a writer and senior editor of *Art in America,* and the panel included the artist Gretchen Bender, the "artist, theorist" Peter Halley, and Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter, both critics and two of the editors of the new and widely noted periodical *Zone.* Mr. Foster introduced the program with a thumbnail sketch—a tale of ever increasing woe, really—of the cultural and economic history of capitalism from the nineteenth century through the present day.

Unfortunately, technology is one of those subjects that, because of its large and complex history, tends to inspire the utterest nonsense. Thus one was not surprised to hear Mr. Foster celebrating such alternative thinkers as Marshall McLuhan or speaking about the desirability of overcoming such

1 Whether Mr. Gilbert-Rolfe intended this remark as a pre-emptive critique of the Hans Haacke exhibition that opened at the New Museum of Contemporary Art several weeks later—entitled "Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business"—was unclear. But it was an observation that certainly seemed to serve as a sufficient review of that event.

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inherited dichotomies as body/not body, natural/not natural, life/death: the subject of technology does that to people, especially if their knowledge of science and technology is confined to a few political catchphrases. The truth is, technology presents a great problem for contemporary, theoretically inclined Marxists. For while Marx himself was something of a technocrat—believing as he did that technology was an instrument of emancipation—our own bourgeois society is so obviously dependent on advanced technology that one cannot help being suspicious of an agent so indiscriminate in its allegiances. The way out is to see technology as a thoroughly political phenomenon, one that has been perverted in contemporary Western society. And this seemed to be Mr. Foster's basic message. As he put it in the introduction to his influential anthology, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture,* the critics in the volume "take for granted that we are never outside representation—or rather, never outside politics." From there, it was only a small step to his conclusion: "in the face of a culture of reaction on all sides, a practice of resistance is needed."

"Resistance," as it happened, was a word that one was to hear again and again that evening. Gretchen Bender, whose work typically incorporates technological images and gestures, sensibly advised that artists attempt to learn as much as possible about technology and its language; but then she went on to warn that "we are in a time when fascism achieves a democratic face through technology." In her view, art was valuable primarily as an instrument of resistance against the domination of technological fascism. Messrs. Halley and Crary chimed in with more of the same. Sitting there on that chilly night in the Whitney's warm, well-lighted hall, their voices being taped and broadcast to the audience through loudspeakers, they retailed the depredations of modern technology. Mr. Crary warned us of the "totalizing" and dehumanizing tendencies of technology, while Mr. Halley told us that "technology has created a ghostly world where there is no life or death."

But it was Sanford Kwinter who provided the session's most perfect example of critical obscurantism. Indeed, as a co-editor of *Zone,* which (to judge from its recently published inaugural issue) specializes in the new breed of hermetic criticism, he is a conspicuous practitioner of it. His presentation began with a measure of coherence, even, at times, of brilliance; but by the time he came to elaborate his position, it was clear that he was maneuvering through a sea of knowledge-fragments and half-digested theories, bound together by an astonishing capacity for historical simplification. He moved, for example, from Luddism to "Reagan's Star Wars," from the development of the loudspeaker to Hitler and Mussolini, in the twinkling of an eye.

In all this, Mr. Kwinter attained to a kind of secular glossolalia, with radical politics standing in for the Holy Spirit. At times (to step from the ridiculous to the sublime), Mr. Kwinter's disquisition reminded one of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos, for whom language had disintegrated to the edge of unintelligibility. "My case, in short, is this," Hofmannsthal's character wrote in his famous letter: "I have lost completely the ability to think or to speak of anything coherently . . . . Single words floated round me; they congealed into eyes which stared at me and into which I was forced to stare back —whirlpools which gave me vertigo and, reeling incessantly, led into the void." The difference, of course, is that for Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos this frightening disintegration of language led to an epiphany of a reality beyond language; for Mr. Kwinter it seemed to have become an end in itself.

Not that Mr. Kwinter—or any of the other participants, for that matter—were obtuse or unintelligent; indeed, one of the most disturbing things about all this sort of "theory" is that its pronouncements manage to exhibit interpretative sophistication with just enough truth—trace amounts, as the chemists say—that they cannot be summarily dismissed. Thus Mr. Kwinter may be quite right in distinguishing—as Heidegger had done before him—technological "hard-

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ware" from the underlying world view that a commitment to modern science and technology presupposes. And there is something to be said, too, for his identification of the development of double-entry bookkeeping, one-point perspective, and the experimental method in the Renaissance as crucial achievements that stand behind our modern technological orientation. But Mr. Kwinter takes all these enormously complex phenomena, blends them with a dash of politics, and produces a disorienting mixture of truth and falsity.

The panel's presentations went on a bit long that evening, and so the discussion period was curtailed. But there was time for one question to be repeated two or three times: Where, in this entire discussion of "The Neofuturist Moment: Art and Technology," could one find art? The panelists responded with plenty of talk—mostly, of course, about art as a tool of resistance—but nothing they said resembled a reply. For the truth was, they had completely lost sight of art.

The final episode of "Sundays at Six"—"The Critic in the Mirror"—was devoted to a discussion of the theory, practice, and logistics of contemporary art criticism. The art critic Roberta Smith served as moderator on a panel that included Christopher Knight, the art critic for the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner,* and the free-lance critics Kate Linker, Robert Storr, and Paul Taylor. Miss Smith began by noting the "incredible diversification" in art criticism today, the best of which, in her view, was "energized" by psychoanalytic and feminist criticism. She proceeded to touch on most of the themes that would be mooted later in the evening, distinguishing, for example, between art *theory,* which is recondite and "philosophical," and art *writing,* which describes the discussion of art in popular magazines and newspapers. In between the two she located traditional art criticism, which she seemed to favor by dubbing it "the bottom line." She even told us that "at its best" art criticism was "equal to art." Miss Smith also gave the "practical" side of writing art criticism its due, noting that she had considered using "Meeting Deadlines, Meeting with Editors, and Meeting the Rent" as an alternative title for the session.

Kate Linker spoke first, providing a somewhat brazen account of the distinction between art criticism and what goes under the name of art theory today. The former occupies itself with questions of meaning and value, the latter with what she described as questions of the *production* of meaning and value. The function of the art critic—an occupation that she denied having an interest in or talent for—is to bring the viewer closer to the work: to bring the meaning of the work to light. In this sense, criticism "tends to look at the work as a bounded object." Art theory, on the other hand, looks not to the work but to the *practice* of making the work. It is interested not so much in artworks but in the institutions and social practices within which they are produced and exhibited. In other words, art "theory" in Miss Linker's sense views art as "fundamentally ideological and political"; it focuses on the economic, political, and sexual ideas that provide the context for works of art. By her own account, art theory in this sense was a "lugubrious" activity. Given so candid and pellucid an appraisal, one can only wonder how it has come about that art itself should have so little claim on the attention of such "theorists."

Mr. Storr iterated several of Miss Linker's points about the distinction between criticism and "theory," but announced himself "wary" of theory precisely because it tended to obfuscate the work of art. His comments were not particularly enlightening, though in the context of the Whitney's series any suggestion that the meaning of a work of visual art might be nonverbal had the air of novelty. For his part, Mr. Knight quoted Hans Hofmann to the effect that art is a perpetual struggle against blindness, and cautioned critics to be aware of their own blindness. He also spoke of the "common misconception" that the function of art criticism is the "education" of the audience, a

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proposition that he rejected "categorically." Such a notion was bankrupt, he told us, because it presumes a "hierarchy," presumes, that is to say, that the critic knows more about art than his readers; this presumption Mr. Knight found totally unacceptable, and he identified his own responsibility as a critic first "to myself as a writer" and secondarily to his audience, not as students of art but "as readers."

Now there is a great deal that one might say about Mr. Knight's dismissal of the educative function of criticism; it is indeed, as he acknowledged, a common idea, so common that it has been held by virtually every critic from Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin down to our own day. T. S. Eliot, to take but one example, speculated that "no exponent of criticism . . . has, I presume, ever made the preposterous assumption that criticism is an autotelic activity." The function of criticism, he insisted, was "the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste." But leaving T. S. Eliot to one side, one has to wonder what Mr. Knight's editors at the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* and his readers in California think of his attitude: are they content with a "critic" who refuses on principle to make value judgments, who discounts the educative role of criticism, who treats his readers as little more than an audience in search of entertainment? One hesitates to admit that things have degenerated so far, even in California.

Unhappily, Mr. Taylor demonstrated that the East Coast is no more immune to such antics than the West. Describing his earlier career in Australia as being a "nuisance," he alluded to Cyril Connolly's *mot* about the artist wanting to make mud pies that last: he, Mr. Taylor told us, wanted to make mud pies to throw. Thus he liked to think of his writing as a "microwave oven" that "spoils" the objects it treats. But unlike some of the more politically minded critics in his midst, what he is after is not "subversion" but "entertainment." Mr. Taylor began his remarks by mentioning that he feels a pang of embarrassment whenever his writing comes out in print; what is surprising is that he has managed to salvage the capacity for so decorous an emotion.

The discussion period that evening ranged over a number of topics, but settled mostly on the mechanics of writing criticism and the financial difficulties that beset critics. The "real problem," according to Miss Smith, is that one cannot make a living writing art criticism. But I couldn't help thinking that, since Mr. Knight is one of the rare exceptions to this rule, it may be all to the good that writing criticism is as poorly remunerated as it is.

Critically, the Whitney's "Sundays at Six" amounted to no more than what one would have predicted. For the most part, the sessions vacillated between the mildly outrageous doggerel of Mr. Taylor, the political campaigning of Mr. Berger, and the various species of politically charged theoretical obscurantism espoused by Messrs. Gilbert-Rolfe, Foster, and Kwinter. Anyone interested in art or art criticism would have had to content himself with the few crumbs dispensed along the way by the artists on the panels and, occasionally, by Miss Smith. But what gives one pause is the thought that this sort of thing, almost totally in thrall to the latest fashions in art-world drivel, can take place under the auspices of the public-education department of a major American museum. Apparently, the Whitney has gone along with Mr. Knight in abdicating any responsibility for upholding critical standards—though at least Mr. Knight has the excuse, however unconvincing, that if he had wanted to teach he "would have become a teacher." The public-education department of a cultural institution, by nature cast in the role of teacher, cannot avail itself of even that response. And of course the Whitney's "Sundays at Six" are hardly uncommon events; indeed, what is most disquieting about the entire performance is the fact that it is being repeated, the same play with a different cast, at museums and universities across the country. What it tokens is the unabashed politicization of art and utter debasement of critical standards.

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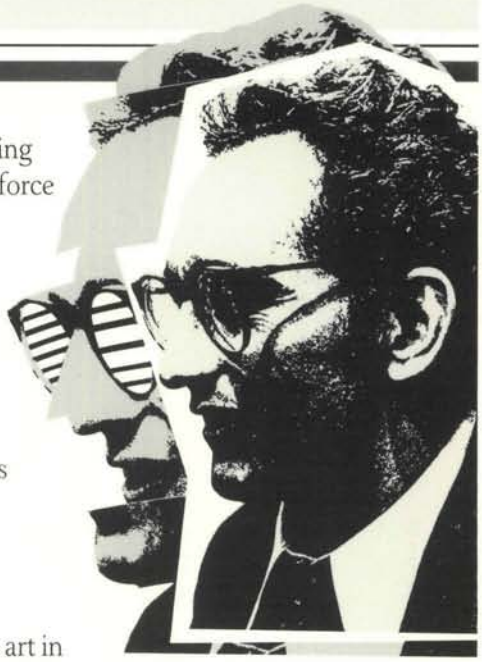

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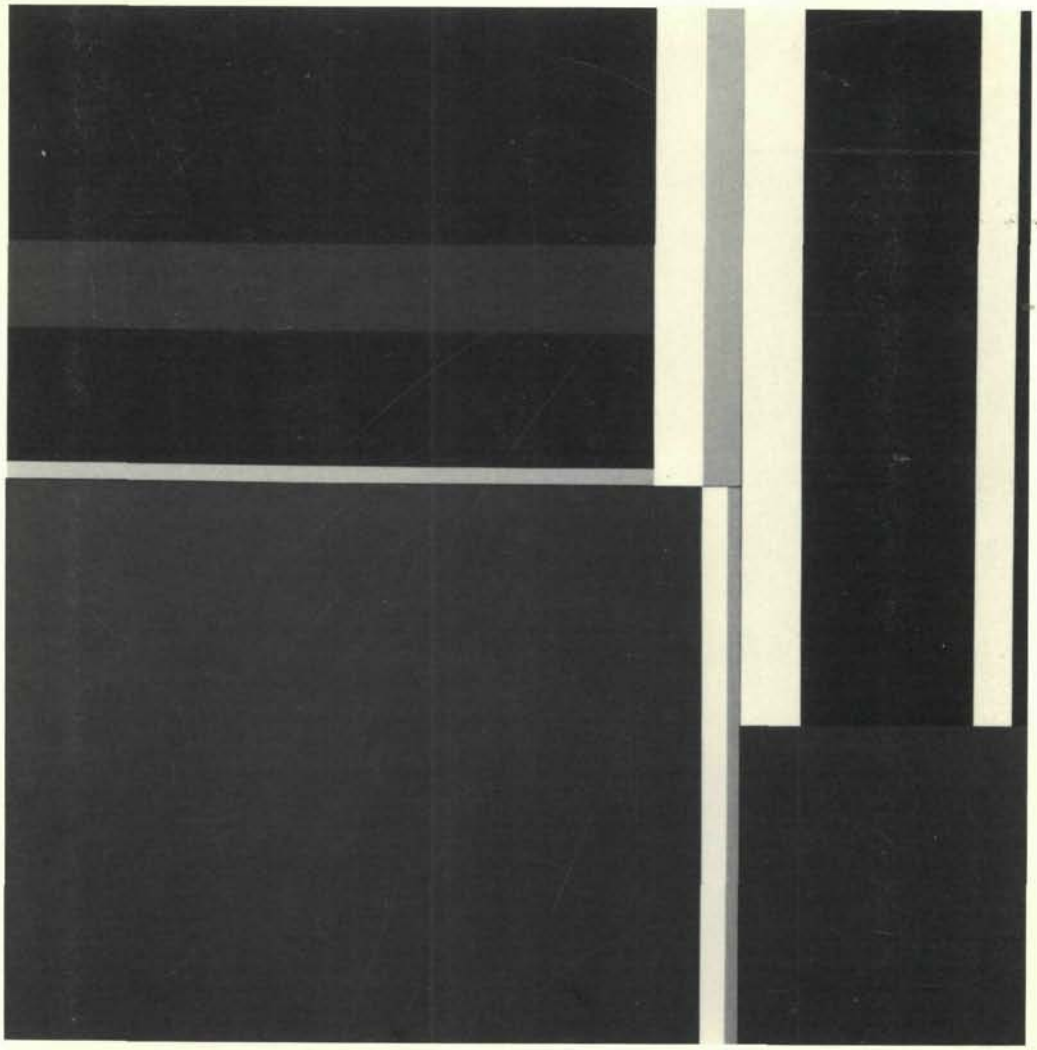

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